

Organisational flattening and the implications for internal stakeholders and communication: A systematic literature review

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Abstract

An increasingly competitive business environment means organisational change must often occur from within, through activities such as organisational flattening. This has implications on organisational communication as those removed from the organisation (often middle managers) are often the most crucial to communication within an organisation. The aim of this thesis is to understand the activity of organisational flattening and the implications it has for internal stakeholders and organisational communication. Through undertaking a comprehensive systematic literature review, a clear summary and synthesis of the relevant literature in the research area was produced. After following a pre-defined method and protocol, 67 eligible resources were utilised to answer three research questions: (1) What is organisational flattening and how is it being used in contemporary organisations?; (2) How do internal stakeholders experience organisational flattening that involves reducing or removing middle management?; and (3) What are the consequences for organisational communication of flattening the organisational structure? After completing the review, several valuable findings emerged. Firstly, organisations engage in flattening to remain competitive, become more efficient internally and to empower and develop internal stakeholders. Secondly, all stakeholders experience less role clarity as a result of delayering, while lower-level employees can often no longer rely on the organisation for career development after flattening (as their opportunities for internal promotions decrease). Thirdly, a flatter organisational structure allows for an increase in communication frequency between internal stakeholders, but this communication may not always be positive, due to low role clarity, morale and work-related stress (brought on by engaging in an organisational flattening). Finally, a clear lack of research on the communication implications of organisational delayering led to a significant research opportunity – the opportunity to specifically study delayering as a unique form of organisational change and to identify the challenges and opportunities this activity introduces. This thesis will prove valuable to practitioners looking to learn about or engage in organisational delayering activities, and serve as a rigid, concise resource for further research in the areas of delayering and organisational communication – an area that is becoming more relevant as business environments change.

1. Introduction

As markets and business environments become more competitive, organisations are forced to adapt. This can often mean a change from within and engaging in post-bureaucratic activities. The focus of this thesis is on organisational delayering (or flattening) and the communication implications this has within an organisation. Delayering involves the planned reduction or removal of hierarchical levels within an organisation (Wulf, 2012; Littler, Wiesner & Dunford, 2003) and aligns clearly with a post-bureaucratic stance, where decisions are based on dialogue and consensus rather than authority and command (Grey & Garsten, 2001). A post-bureaucratic structure is typically achieved by removing middle layers within the organisation's hierarchy, where middle managers reside (Grey & Garsten, 2001).

Organisations engage in delayering for reasons other than a desire to become less bureaucratic, as shedding layers can help them improve efficiency and cut employment costs (Joyce, 2005). As business environments become increasingly competitive, it may become difficult for an organisation to save money by reducing external costs (e.g., by reducing transactional costs in the supply chain, customer service or philanthropic activities) so they may need to look internally. Carefully executed reduction of levels in an organisation's hierarchy can produce cost savings while at the same time improving the ability to remain competitive and adapt to changes (Accenture, 2016, Joyce, 2005). This is a consequence of the way delayering can empower and liberate employees to take more responsibility for workplace decisions (Lashley, 1995). However, empowerment, improved internal processes and profitability are not inevitable outcomes of delayering (Powell, 2002; Kubheka, Kholopane & Mbohwa, 2013).

Middle managers can play a key role in the development and maintenance of an organisation, particularly through their communication (Bryant & Stensaker, 2011), as they link the executive to the front line and interpret and steer many change processes. Given that such middle management functions are seen to be crucial to an organisation's success, it is surprising that they are the target for removal or reduction when flattening is undertaken (Littler, Wiesner & Dunford, 2003). It is also ironic that middle managers may in effect end up orchestrating their own removal from the organisation, due to both their role as communicators and the fact

that they are often the target of layering activities (Bryant & Stensaker, 2011; Littler, Wiesner & Dunford, 2003). This study aims to understand the relevant literature in the areas of organisational communication and layering/flattening.

Three questions were crafted to guide a systematic review designed to understand the concept of layering and reveal its effects on organisations and their internal stakeholders. A systematic review is a review of a formulated research question (or questions) by using systematic and explicit methods to identify, analyse, appraise and summarise relevant research in an area (Needleman, 2002).

Research Questions

This thesis presents the findings from a systematic literature review which examines the consequences of organisational flattening and how this strategy has been employed and experienced in contemporary organisations. It seeks to answer three research questions (RQs):

1. What is organisational flattening and how has it been used in contemporary organisations?
2. How do internal stakeholders experience organisational flattening that involves reducing or removing middle management?
3. What are the consequences for organisational communication of flattening the organisational structure?

Research Justification

This topic is highly relevant to the business world today, both nationally and internationally. In New Zealand, high profile organisations are engaging in organisational layering or what could be termed post-bureaucratic practices (NBR, 2018; NBR, 2018a). For example, in 2018, the retailer The Warehouse Group announced a major restructuring and layoffs of up to 180 staff nationwide, with a focus on reducing supervisor and team leader positions (NBR, 2018).

Telecommunications organisation Spark undertook a major reshuffle, moving towards a more streamlined way of working which involved new employee contracts, changes to the executive team and new methods of operating (NBR, 2018a). Internationally, Tesla and McDonalds have also engaged in flattening and similar streamlining practices. In May 2018, Tesla CEO Elon Musk announced an extensive reorganisation at the company, indicating that management flattening was required to improve communication and prepare for the future (Electrek, 2018). Fast food giant McDonalds is also engaging in flattening, in a bid to become more dynamic, nimble and competitive (INC, 2018). In 2019, auto giant Ford announced the removal of approximately 10% of salaried staff, in order to cut bureaucracy within the company and flatten the management structure (CNN, 2019).

The fact that flattening is a common and increasingly popular response to changing contemporary business environments (Littler, Wiesner & Dunford, 2003; Shaw & Schneier, 1993; Rajan & Wulf, 2006) means that understanding what is known about the consequences for stakeholders becomes important. By undertaking a review of the literature that addresses the consequences of delayering for organisations generally, and the communication that constitutes them specifically, this thesis will provide a valuable resource for both scholars in the fields of strategic management and organisational communication, and practitioners needing to make informed decisions before embarking on a programme of organisational change that involves delayering. The review specifically contributes a systematic analysis of the literature that answers the three research questions - focussing on the activity of delayering, how internal stakeholders react, and the communication consequences.

Defining Key Concepts

The key concepts that pertain to this review such as flattening, delayering, downsizing, post-bureaucracy, post-bureaucratic organisation, post-bureaucratic practice, and internal communication are defined in this section. Organisational **flattening** is defined as “*the elimination of layers in a firm’s organisational hierarchy, and the broadening of managers’ spans of control*” (Wulf, 2012). As noted earlier, the focus of organisational flattening activities is reducing or removing middle management (Littler, Wiesner & Dunford, 2003). **Middle managers** are defined as “*those who perform a co-ordinating role where they mediate,*

negotiate, and interpret connections between the organisations institutional (strategic) and technical (operational) levels” (Floyd & Woolridge, 1997).

It is necessary to distinguish between delayering or flattening and downsizing, in order to be clear about the focus of this thesis. Downsizing is focused simply on a general reduction of employees within an organisation (Kozlowski, 1993; Littler & Innes, 2004; Thornhill & Saunders, 1998). In contrast, flattening or delayering is focused specifically on the reduction or removal of hierarchical levels within the middle of an organisation (Wulf, 2012; Littler, Wiesner & Dunford, 2003). Delayering can occur without downsizing, by redefining the positions of existing staff within the new, flatter structure (Dunford, Bramble & Littler, 1998). **Downsizing** is defined as “*the planned elimination of positions or jobs*” (De Vries & Balazs, 1997) or “*a deliberate organisational decision to reduce the workforce that is intended to improve organisational performance*” (Kozlowski, 1993). A clear agreement in previous research is that downsizing focuses on a general reduction in personnel (Littler & Innes, 2004; Thornhill & Saunders, 1998) while **delayering** is defined as “*the planned vertical compression of managerial levels of hierarchy, involving the wholesale removal of one or more layers of managerial or supervisory staff from the organisation’s payroll*” (Littler, Wiesner & Dunford, 2003). The concepts of flattening/delayering and downsizing are thus related, but not the same. In contrast, the terms delayering and flattening are often used interchangeably in the literature and this will be the case in this study.

Post-bureaucracy is a concept with a focus on the formal reduction of hierarchical levels, giving a more flexible environment and a less-visible boundary between the inside and the outside of the organisation (Grey & Garsten, 2001). A **post-bureaucratic organisation** is one where the structure promotes consensus instead of relying on authority, and where everyone takes responsibility for the success of the whole organisation (Krackhardt, Hecksher & Donnellon, 1994). Flattening/delayering is aligned with and related to post-bureaucracy because **post-bureaucratic practice** aims to erode or dismantle bureaucracy within an organisation (Grey & Garsten, 2001) and this can entail reducing layers in hierarchically structured organisations.

The “communication constitutes the organisation” (CCO) perspective proposes that communication is not merely an instrument for organising but that communication in its various forms actually constitutes the organisation (Sillince, 2010; Schoeneborn et al, 2014; Cooren, Kuhn, Cornelissen & Clark, 2011). Organisational communication can be classified as internal or external depending on the communicators’ role and relationship to the organisation. **Internal communication** is defined as “*the communication transactions between individuals and/or groups at various levels and in different areas of specialisation that are intended to design and redesign organisations, to implement designs, and to co-ordinate day-to-day activities*” (Frank & Brownell, 1989). Internal communication can be described as horizontal when it occurs between members at the same level in the hierarchy, and as leader-member communication when between leaders and followers at different layers. It can occur in dyads, groups, or across the whole organisation and can be face-to-face, through traditional methods (e.g. noticeboards, memo, telephone) or digital methods (e.g. email, blogs and video). This communication can be classified as formal or informal depending on whether it occurs casually or is a recognised and endorsed form of engagement (such as a staff meeting or interview). In a change process such as delayering, internal communication takes on an additional dimension, embracing transactions between all groups and levels (Shaw & Schneier, 1993; Cooren, Kuhn, Cornelissen & Clark, 2011).

Thesis Outline

This thesis consists of five chapters. The Introduction has presented the purpose of this research, identified its academic and practical relevance, outlined the key research questions and defined the key concepts of the study. It concludes by outlining the focus of the remaining four chapters.

Chapter Two, Literature Review, presents the findings from the initial literature review undertaken by the author. This chapter will focus on identifying and analysing various themes in the relevant literature, with the goal of clarifying the research gap to be filled by this study.

Chapter Three, Methodology, introduces the literature review process and discusses both the narrative and systematic reviews undertaken by the author. This will include how the author engaged in these reviews, precisely what was analysed, and the guiding frameworks and processes followed.

Chapter Four, Systematic Literature Review, presents the findings of the systematic literature review undertaken by the author. This review will focus on addressing each key research question in detail, while being guided by the framework discussed in Chapter Three.

Chapter Five, Discussion and Conclusion, begins by summarising the key findings from this thesis, linking back to the three questions at the core of this study. From here, the practical and theoretical implications of this research are discussed, as well as research limitations and potential areas for future research. The thesis concludes by proposing questions for future studies of the effects of layering on organisations and their communication.

2. Literature Review

This chapter will discuss the findings of the initial literature review undertaken by the author. It will begin by addressing the concept of post-bureaucracy, with a focus on the various activities and ideas it encompasses. The role of middle managers in organisations today will then be discussed, along with the value they add internally. The literature on organisational downsizing will then be analysed, including the aims of downsizing and the potential impacts on those who experience it, before shifting the focus to the literature on organisational delayering. This will include an analysis of the activity of delayering, while looking to gain an insight into the effects on stakeholders within the organisational environment. The author will conclude this chapter by analysing and discussing the research gap identified.

Post-bureaucracy

As discussed in the introduction to this paper, post-bureaucracy is a broad term covering a number of strategies and outcomes. The concept is clearly defined as “*a stance that aims to remove or reduce both hierarchical and bureaucratic elements within an organisation, while building a flexible, team-based environment*” (Grey & Garsten, 2001). Activities that align with a post-bureaucratic stance include delayering or flattening, team-based work and autonomous roles (Harris & Wegg-Prosser, 2007). Organisations move towards promoting responsible autonomy and allowing employees more discretion, control, and input within their roles (Johnson, Wood, Brewster & Brookes, 2009). Post-bureaucratic activities are usually highly resource-intensive, so are more likely to be undertaken by larger organisations (Grey & Garsten, 2001). While this may be the case, the divide between a post-bureaucratic and bureaucratic organisation is not a binary one – many forms of hybrid can exist (Johnson, Wood, Brewster & Brookes, 2009; Josserand, Teo & Clegg, 2006).

Challenges of implementation

Challenges may arise when looking to implement a post-bureaucratic change within an organisation. More traditional methods of bureaucratic management foster trust amongst employees, however shifting towards becoming a post-bureaucratic organisation may increase job insecurity while decreasing trust (Koivumäki & Pyöriä, 2013). Norms, roles and identities can quickly become threatened, leading to resistance to change from internal stakeholders (Torsteinsen, 2012). Extensive change that involves a complete shift in organisational stance cannot simply be imposed on a top-down basis, as difficulties arise in areas such as employee roles and identity, as well as in lines of communication (Josserand, Teo & Clegg, 2006).

When looking to make a change, it is important for practitioners to understand the conditions in which trust may be changed or lost when an organisational structure changes. While trust within an organisation is integral to both day-to-day operations and any additional initiatives, research indicates that trust develops and is cemented over time within bureaucratic organisations, thus becoming a ‘non-issue’ (Grey & Garsten, 2001). This must be re-addressed with change in organisational structures and forms, particularly when moving towards post-bureaucratic stances. Trust cannot be defined in only one way – it is often complex and situation-specific (Raelin, 2011). A key element of a post-bureaucratic organisation is the characteristic of a consensus-building dialogue, rather than a rule-following one (Johnson, Wood, Brewster & Brookes, 2009). For post-bureaucratic organisational change to be successful, there must be an element of trust between individuals and the organisation. Existing trust in a traditional, hierarchical structure may not survive a shift to a post-bureaucratic organisational structure (Johnson, Wood, Brewster & Brookes, 2009).

Control in a more traditional sense is seen as a barrier to adaptability and flexibility, therefore managers should facilitate, not control, while allowing a democratic environment to develop (Lee & Edmondson, 2017; Raelin, 2011). Shifting away from a focus on control towards a more democratic environment aligns with an innovative and enriching work environment where employees can develop (Lee & Edmondson, 2017). In times of change in external business environments, the hierarchical model of control becomes less effective and an

organisation should instead focus on selective use of both soft and formal control (Raelin, 2011).

Communication and information flow

Communication is an integral part of any organisation and value is found in the creation of an atmosphere of full and free communication, regardless of rank and power (Lee & Edmondson, 2017). This is increasingly apparent in a time of change, which often is not linear, but occurs in waves, episodes, or as a result of regulations (Johnson, Wood, Brewster & Brookes, 2009). Communicating a shift in organisational stance must be managed efficiently to avoid inconsistencies in messages within the organisation. When reporting lines change, information flows differently within an organisation, which can lead to inefficiencies in communication and tensions between employees (Arnaud, Mills & Legrand, 2016).

While removal or reduction of hierarchical elements to an organisation may seem relatively straightforward, it is important to understand the change process and the implications of an organisational change of this nature (Kettley, 1995). Understanding the crucial elements of trust, role identity and information flow is important, along with how a post-bureaucratic change process occurs. While developing a post-bureaucratic stance within an organisation may be feasible, the logistics of this change require attention at each level of the organisation. (Powell, 2002; Arnaud, Mills & Legrand, 2016).

The role of middle management

The role a middle manager plays within an organisation remains a focus of academic literature (McCann, Morris & Hassard, 2008; Sharma & Good, 2013; Bryant & Stensaker, 2011). Middle managers are defined as *“those who perform a co-ordinating role where they mediate, negotiate, and interpret connections between the organisations institutional (strategic) and*

technical (operational) levels” (Floyd & Woolridge, 1997). It is important to understand the value of middle managers when changing job roles and environments.

The value of middle managers

It is valuable to consider the role a middle manager plays in an organisation today. While post-bureaucratic activities like delayering and increasing workplace democracy look to remove middle managers from an organisation (Littler, Wiesner & Dunford, 2003), others disagree with this, and see middle managers as important strategic assets to an organisation (Arnaud, Mills, Legrand & Maton, 2016). Managerial layers provide opportunity for development and succession, integrate functions and perhaps most importantly, transmit information both internally and externally (Shaw & Schneier, 1993). Proponents of the value of middle management claim that the most productive and focused organisational structure is hierarchical and is built and developed around middle management (Skrabec, 2001). Middle managers synthesise information for those around them, help their organisation to adapt, and use their knowledge to allocate resources correctly, thus providing a number of benefits for organisational communication (Balogun, 2003).

Middle managers play a crucial role in enabling various stakeholders to achieve their goals and organisations must foster and develop the capabilities of their middle management personnel (Sharma & Good, 2013). Developing the skills of those who guide and assist others within an organisation (middle managers) may allow an organisation to succeed and grow as a whole (Balogun, 2003). Proponents claim that middle managers should be developed within an organisation and remain an integral part of day-to-day operations (Skrabec, 2001; Sharma & Good, 2013).

Changing job roles

As organisational changes such as delayering become more prevalent, middle managers are under attack, and can be seen as inefficient during change processes and obstructive to change

(Balogun, 2003). Middle managers are often expected to remain positive in times of change, even though the change has the potential to negatively affect their career prospects within an organisation (Bryant & Stensaker, 2011). They experience low role clarity during organisational change, while often having unfair expectations placed on them during the process (Kettley, 1995; Bryant & Stensaker, 2011). Middle managers are change recipients – those who are being told to change but often having no influence on the decision-making. This means that often, middle managers are still attempting to grasp the change themselves, while communicating the change to subordinates who also have very little knowledge of what is occurring (Balogun & Johnson, 2004).

Middle managers' workloads and work-related stress both increase during organisational change. In addition they are subject to poor role clarity and uncertainty about their personal career development opportunities (Kettley, 1995; Thomas & Dunkerley, 1999). The individual perspectives of middle managers must be considered in the case of an upcoming or ongoing change initiative within an organisation (Balogun, 2003; Shaw & Schneier, 1993). It becomes clear that middle managers play a crucial role in both the day-to-day running of an organisation and any additional activities such as change initiatives (Skrabec, 2001; Bryant & Stensaker, 2011), therefore the role of the middle manager must be valued and acknowledged during this process.

Changing business environments

With internal and external business environments changing rapidly, middle managers must adapt. They have the potential to add value during a transformational change (Spreitzer & Quinn, 1996) but if they are uncertain about their current or new role within the organisation, this may not be possible (Thomas & Dunkerley, 1999). It is often difficult for middle managers to maintain their identity when the social and economic value of middle management is being questioned (through activities such as delayering) (Thomas & Linstead, 2002). Often those communicating a change within an organisation are middle managers (Skrabec, 2001; Shaw & Schneier, 1993; Balogun, 2003), so if they are insecure and confused about their role during or after a change, it is valuable to consider how this could influence internal communication.

As the activity of delayering reduces and removes hierarchical levels within an organisation, from the perspective of a middle manager, this means that their individual role and thus career prospects may be affected, which can lead to resentment towards the organisation (McCann, Morris & Hassard, 2008). Flattening can mean they may no longer rely on the organisation for career progression as there are fewer positions available at the management level (Littler, Wiesner & Dunford, 2003; Morris, Hassard & McCann, 2006).

Downsizing

Downsizing is defined simply as “*the planned elimination of positions or jobs*” (De Vries & Balazs, 1997) and is a heavily researched area of management literature. It encompasses a wide range of activities which include restructuring, redundancies and delayering. It is valuable to understand the aims of downsizing and the impact on those within the organisation.

The use of downsizing and its impact on stakeholders

Aims and expected benefits of downsizing include cutting costs, streamlining operations and smoother processes (Cascio, 1993). It is commonly used when an organisation wishes to remain competitive and become more efficient internally, and the frequency of downsizing is increasing over time (Thornhill & Saunders, 1998; Littler & Innes, 2004). In the Australian private sector, for example, 88 percent of firms undertook some form of restructuring between 1994 and 1998 (Littler & Innes, 2004). Organisations undertake a change initiative (in this case downsizing) to achieve or experience a planned or anticipated benefits, however these often fail to materialise, due to the inability of the organisation to look past the short-term (Cascio, 1993).

Iverson & Zatzick (2011) indicated that of the current downsizing research, a large percentage relates to surviving employee morale and/or how the organisation performs as a result of the change. However for employees, redundancies due to organisational downsizing may not be

all bad news. For those leaving (or potentially leaving), substantial redundancy packages may be on offer, while for those remaining, redundancies may have the potential to safeguard their positions within the organisation and endorse the value of their role (Collett, 2004).

As a direct result of downsizing activities, the volume of work for a middle manager often increases, along with stress and other internal pressures (Thomas & Dunkerley, 1999). Newell & Dopson (1996) found that 80% of individual middle managers had experienced an organisational restructure of some kind, while 84% had concerns about internal career development opportunities. Other researchers have found that after an organisational delayering, career expectations did not align with the downsized organisation, as many middle managers still regard a hierarchical progression within the organisation as an indicator of success (Thomas & Dunkerley, 1999; Morris, Hassard & McCann, 2008). This finding is particularly important and is analysed in detail in the following chapter.

Emotions and reactions of employees and managers

Downsizing is traumatic for individuals and puts a strain on internal relationships, even when downsizing may be seen as a rational action (Tourish, Paulsen, Hobman & Bordia, 2004). While some employees may be readily accepting of redundancy activities, others remained in a stage of denial, which effectively led them to become stuck in a cycle of organisational grief (Davey, Fearon & McLaughlin, 2013). The effects of downsizing on communication must also be considered. A review of less-hierarchical organising by Lee & Edmondson (2017) affirmed that it is vital to provide a clear explanation as to why the organisation is undertaking downsizing activities, as this can assist in maintaining the trust of remaining employees. During delivery of bad news, such as announcements of impending redundancies, three stages are important: preparation, delivery and transition (Bies, 2013). All employees must be made aware that the firm will be experiencing critical change and the organisation they work in now will cease to exist (Appelbaum, Everard & Hung, 1999). A review by Cascio (1993) found that managing and assisting survivors through effective and efficient communication is a key factor to the success of downsizing activities. In an explorative study of Danish corporations undergoing downsizing, Aggerholm (2008) reiterated these findings.

In summary, downsizing and its effects have been explored extensively in the current literature. Downsizing as a strategy can seem relatively simple on the surface – it is simply the activity of reducing the number of employees in an organisation. What is not simple is the implementation of downsizing, the effect on employees and the communication implications. At a managerial level, actions must be taken to ensure a smooth, open process, while understanding potential stakeholder reactions and their consequences.

Organisational flattening and delayering

Building on the definitions given in Chapter One, organisational flattening involves the reduction of layers in a hierarchy, often through the removal of middle managers. It is an activity that aligns with a post-bureaucratic stance and often comes under the wider umbrella of downsizing (although it is not the same). The term flattening is used interchangeably with delayering in this research area and this will also be the case for this review. The concept of organisational delayering will be examined in detail when answering RQ1. Prior to this, it is valuable to gain an overview of the current research area and understand why it occurs.

Organisational findings

The literature shows that organisations engage in organisational flattening or delayering to remain competitive, create internal efficiencies and develop their employees (Shaw, 1993; Littler, Wiesner & Dunford, 2003; Powell, 2002). As a result of delayering, decision-making within the organisation either shifts down to lower-level employees, or up to senior management, thus increasing their span of control (Rajan & Wulf, 2006). Wulf (2012) found that a key reason for delayering, from the perspective of the Chief Executive Officer, was to get closer to the day-to-day operations of the organisation. Even if decision-making is shifted to lower-level employees, research has found that the success of a flatter organisation still often relies on the people at the most senior level of the organisation (Wulf, 2012).

Effects of organisational flattening on employees

The following systematic literature review provided clear empirical evidence that organisational layering activities can affect employees in many different ways, both positively and negatively (Powell, 2002; Ebadan & Winstanley, 1997; Accard, 2015). Kubheka, Kholopane & Mbohwa (2013) studied the effects of organisational flattening on employee performance in a South African retail group, identifying both positive and negative aspects to a flatter hierarchy. Some employees felt happier and empowered when involved in organisational goal-setting and decision making, but many found that training opportunities were lacking and that senior-level managers still played a strong role in decision-making activities (Kubheka, Kholopane & Mbohwa, 2013).

Empowerment is an important element and benefit of engaging in post-bureaucratic activities like organisational layering. Powell (2002) analysed organisational layering in the education sector, surveying both senior management staff and employees. Following an organisational flattening, both groups felt they had more responsibility but many reported significantly less role clarity. All groups were disappointed with the effectiveness of communication, and some also felt that power relationships remained unchanged (Powell, 2002).

Power (both informal and formal) is built through alliances, networks and ties with other employees. The power of an individual within an organisation is significantly affected by the various interactions they have with others (Liu & Moskvina, 2016). This is important to consider when analysing the role communication plays in a change initiative. If an initiative is not communicated effectively by those implementing it, existing informal relationships within the organisation may potentially hinder the change (Liu & Moskvina, 2016; Bies, 2013).

Organisational flattening, or layering, occurs in response to internal and external organisational challenges. Layering does not simply involve the removal or reduction of middle-managers, but is an extended process that relies on consistency and clear lines of communication before, during and after implementation (Kettley, 1995). How employees and

managers interact with each other within an organisation is an important element of this process. Both formal and informal networks and how they change can affect the success of an organisational change (Liu & Moskvina, 2016). While it is clear that organisational flattening is often a response to internal challenges, the resulting additional challenges introduced must also be considered (Rajan & Wulf, 2006; Kubheka, Kholopane & Mbohwa, 2013).

Conclusion

Delving deeper into the existing literature by engaging in a narrative literature review provides the opportunity to analyse and synthesize literature in the research area, while identifying the gap in the literature to address. We are clearly facing an environment that encourages the removal of middle managers through post-bureaucratic activities such as organisational layering (Littler, Wiesner & Dunford, 2003; Shaw & Schneier, 1993). This trend conflicts with the idea that middle management is crucial for the success of an organisation, particularly for internal communication and flow of information (Skrabec, 2001; Balogun, 2003). Organisational layering occurs for a wide range of reasons and a focus on the communication implications of this activity will prove valuable.

Although the research area is relatively mature and well-developed, there are areas that have not been adequately addressed by the literature. By utilising a wide range of current literature and following a rigorous and defensible systematic review process, the author can analyse and synthesize the literature in the areas of organisational layering and organisational communication. The current literature around downsizing and communication is extensive, while the literature specifically focused on layering and communication is lacking. These activities are similar but are not the same. The removal or reduction of middle managers may introduce specific challenges and consequences that should be understood as layering becomes more frequent. A clear focus on the communication implications of organisational layering is required, along with an attempt to understand how stakeholders within an organisation experience this activity. This is the purpose of this study.

Chapter Summary

This chapter began by outlining and analysing the literature on key themes in the research area. The concept of post-bureaucracy was explained, before focussing on middle managers and the value they provide within traditional organisations. The literature on downsizing was examined, before narrowing down to the specific activity of layering. Finally, the findings of this traditional narrative literature review were discussed before identifying and justifying the gap in research that will be the focus of the current study.

3. Methodology

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss and analyse the methods employed in this study. The chapter begins by discussing the objectives of this research. The approaches taken to the narrative and systematic literature reviews are outlined and compared, before the author describes the PRISMA framework, how it guided this review of flattening, and its consequences for organisations. Information inclusion and exclusion criteria are then presented and discussed, along with criteria for avoiding researcher bias. Finally, the systematic review process is discussed in detail, including the key word search terms and exact review process undertaken.

Research Objectives

This thesis aims to gather, synthesise and summarise evidence identified through a comprehensive systematic literature review, with a focus on assessing the impacts of organisational flattening or delayering activities on the organisation and the implications of such strategic change for communication.

As noted in the Introduction, this study aims to answer the following research questions:

1. What is organisational flattening and how has it been used in contemporary organisations?
2. How do internal stakeholders experience organisational flattening that involves the reduction of middle managers?
3. What are the consequences for organisational communication of flattening the organisational structure?

Methods

Narrative Reviews

There are various ways to approach literature reviews in academic research. This section describes and compares the two types of reviews used in this study, while identifying and justifying the value they will add. Findings from the initial literature review were presented in Chapter 2. Findings from the comprehensive systematic literature review will be presented in Chapter 4.

A traditional (or narrative) **literature review** is defined as “*Published materials that provide examination of recent or current literature*” (Grant & Booth, 2009). A narrative review is often used as rationale for new research by identifying gaps in the literature in a research area (Temple, 2019). It allows an author to provide a foundational overview and address the significance of the research themes in an area, to assist in production of a full, stand-alone research project (Baker, 2016). Literature reviews serve a research field by providing a bridge between the vast amount of information available and a reader who does not have the time or resources to track this information down (Baumeister & Leary, 1997). They can cover a wide range of subjects or themes at various levels of comprehensiveness and are useful to identify the scope of current literature in a research area (Grant & Booth, 2009). **Scope** is defined as “*the extent of the area or subject matter that something deals with or to which it is relevant*” (Oxford Dictionaries, 2019). In this case of this study, the core objective for the initial narrative review was to analyse the scope of the current research literature, identify research themes and assist with development of research questions for use during the systematic literature review.

Undertaking an initial literature review in the early stages of a study is beneficial for several reasons:

- It allows an author to develop a wider understanding of a specific subject area.
- It allows for an introduction of current key themes in the research area.
- The quality and quantity of current literature may be identified and characterised.

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- A viable avenue for further research or review may be identified.

The author engaged in an initial literature review to identify various themes appearing in previous work in the area of interest. During this review, concepts like post-bureaucracy emerged, which allowed the author to further investigate areas such as flattening, empowerment and the role of middle management. In this case, the review allowed the author to identify a research gap and understand the current state of the literature focussing on organisational flattening, middle management and organisational communication. This proved a valuable base for the development of a detailed systematic literature review, the core component of this study. More importantly, engaging in an initial narrative review assisted the author in developing the three research questions that are the focus of this research.

Systematic Literature Reviews

Upon completion of an initial review, the author began a comprehensive systematic literature review. The goal of this review was to answer the three research questions introduced at the beginning of this chapter and discussed in Chapter 4. A systematic literature review has been defined in the following ways:

- “A review of a clearly formulated question that uses systematic and explicit methods to identify, select and critically appraise relevant research, and to collect and analyse data from the studies that are included in the review” (Oakley & Fullerton, 1996).
- “A review that seeks to systematically search for, appraise and synthesize research evidence, often adhering to guidelines on the conduct of a review” (Grant & Booth, 2009).
- “A review of a clearly formulated question that attempts to minimise bias using systematic and explicit methods to identify, select, critically appraise and summarise relevant research” (Needleman, 2002).

Across a wide range of areas including business and management, systematic literature reviews are used effectively to synthesise and summarise research findings on a topic. Other clear benefits and features include:

- A concise, unbiased and reproducible method.
- The ability to make potentially conflicting and complicated results of different types of studies more accessible and understandable (Bambra, 2011).
- Allowing extraction of relevant data only, through the use of various guidelines and protocols.
- Enabling an exhaustive and comprehensive search of relevant materials.

A reliable and reproducible review of current literature in a specific area must follow a clear structure, which allows for increased reader clarity, clear results and perhaps most importantly, allows others to follow the outlined process and reach the same or similar conclusions (Moher et al. 2015). The use of this method is justified in this study, as the research objectives of this paper involve the overlap of organisational structure and organisational communication, both of which are heavily-researched. There is therefore a wide range of information available in the broader research areas, so a clear and concise analysis is crucial. In both research and practice we are exposed to unmanageable amounts of information, so we need systematic reviews to synthesise existing information and provide data for clear and rational decision making (Mulrow, 1994).

In the past, literature reviews in the business and management fields have leaned towards presenting research findings in a narrative form (Denyer & Neely, 2004). While this style can prove valuable in different situations, there are risks involved, such as author bias and insufficient synthesizing of research. Undertaking a systematic literature review allows an author to effectively synthesize content in a research area while allowing for reproducibility and a reduction of bias – both of which are key elements of a systematic literature review (Moher et al, 2015). A fundamental difference between traditional literature reviews and systematic reviews is the presence of an unbiased and comprehensive method during a systematic review (Tranfield, Denyer & Smart, 2003). Due to this, author influence can be

more prevalent during a narrative or thematic review. A systematic review has clear steps in place to eliminate bias. In the case of this study, the initial narrative review proved valuable in identifying themes, key words and search strings for use in the later stages of the research process. Key words and search strings are particularly important as the identification and selection of accurate key words will directly influence the quality of the output from the various databases utilised. The ability of the author to identify a clear gap to explore in the current literature is also important.

Both the initial and systematic reviews served a clear purpose during this study. The initial narrative literature review allowed the author to identify relevant themes and research areas before identifying a research gap, while the systematic review produced a concise, comprehensive review of the literature relevant to the three research questions identified. Both reviews aligned with and complemented each other, allowing the author to achieve the research objectives of this paper.

PRISMA-P

The core idea behind a systematic literature review is the production of a reliable and concise synthesis of current knowledge in a certain area, at a certain time (Bambra, 2011). In the past, the absence of a clear structure, or protocol, has been highlighted (Grant & Booth, 2009). To address this, the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) was developed (Moher, Liberati, Tetzlaff, Altman & PRISMA Group, 2009). These guidelines clearly focus on the reporting of systematic reviews in a high-quality manner. A flow diagram was produced by the group to assist researchers in any academic field in developing a reproducible and valuable systematic review. This flow diagram was adapted for use in this study and will be introduced later in this chapter. In 2015, Moher et al. (2015) developed the PRISMA-P framework, which built off the initial guideline development from 2009. This framework focuses on a 17-point checklist (Appendix 1), which facilitates the preparation and reporting of a robust protocol for the systematic review (Moher et al. 2015).

Both the PRISMA and PRISMA-P frameworks have been used to guide this study throughout the systematic review process (flow diagram and checklist). Upon commencing the systematic review (after completing an initial narrative review) the author utilised the 2009 PRISMA flow diagram in conjunction with the eligibility criteria identified later in this chapter. This proved important in the initial screening, selection and further analysis of a wide range of resources used in this study. The PRISMA-P checklist (Moher et al, 2015) was used as a guiding framework for the duration of the review. Points of particular importance to this research are items 6 to 17 inclusive (Appendix 1). For this study, the author utilised the PRISMA flow diagram and PRISMA-P checklist to assist during the systematic literature review process.

The use of both the PRIMSA and PRISMA-P frameworks is beneficial as it assists the author in developing a reliable and reproducible systematic review. Past criticisms in the area of systematic reviews (across different research areas) focus on the absence of a clear structure throughout the process, which makes it difficult to reproduce - a clear feature of a high-quality systematic literature review (Moher, Liberati, Tetzlaff, Altman & PRISMA Group, 2009). By utilising the guidelines produced by the PRISMA group, the author can ensure a high-quality and defensible systematic literature review. This is achieved through a clear structure, removal of bias where possible, and an easily reproducible review.

The Review Design

This section contains the rationale for selecting a systematic literature review, the criteria the author used to determine inclusion or exclusion, and the search strategy used, including the key word string. The use of a systematic literature review was selected as a clear need has been identified – the requirement of a summary and synthesis of current literature relating to organisational flattening and organisational communication. The undertaking of an initial narrative literature review allowed the author to identify a clear gap in the literature: the lack of a rigid, concise review of the existing research on communication in a post-bureaucratic organisation. The development of a systematic literature review, using the PRISMA-P framework for guidance, allowed for a valuable insight into the specific topic area while providing a foundation for future research in the area.

Sources of information

For this study, electronic databases were used to enable the author to identify all relevant resources. Access to both Scopus and Google Scholar were provided to the author through the relevant University of Canterbury licenses. Scopus is an electronic database by Elsevier and is the largest abstract and citation database of peer-reviewed literature (Elsevier, 2019). Google Scholar is also a large online database that proved useful as a supplementary resource. In both cases, the databases focus on abstracts and citations, while the author was provided accessibility to the full texts through the University of Canterbury. The Scopus database has been reviewed in previous literature and several advantages have been identified:

- Scopus provides a highly enhanced and flexible search tool, allowing the use of complex keywords and search strings (Burnham, 2006).
- The filtering feature allows the user to include or exclude results based on subject area, document type, language and more.
- The Scopus database includes peer-reviewed sources only, meaning each resource must meet a certain standard to be included in the database (i.e. accepted by a peer-reviewed journal).
- The Scopus database has been examined in detail and has been identified as having a clear focus on sciences, including social science, which is relevant to this research area (Bosman et al, 2006).
- The Scopus database offers a wider range of journals than databases such as PubMed and Web of Science (Falagas, Pitsouni, Malietzis & Pappas, 2008).

The value of complex search filters and strings is particularly important and allows a user to engage in intricate, focused searching. When using the Scopus database, Boolean searches are supported and used. This type of search allows the user to combine keywords to produce additional relevant results (or narrow down results), using Boolean operators such as “AND”, “NOT” and “OR”. An example of a very simple Boolean search is “flat” AND “organisation”. Search results will produce only those containing the two keywords. Boolean operators are

useful when looking to narrow down a search and connect various pieces of information (MIT Libraries, 2018; Bosman et al, 2006). The particular search string that the author developed for this study will be discussed later in this chapter. It is important to consider that results appearing ineligible or irrelevant for one research question may be relevant for another. During development of the search string used in this study, the author tested a number of different search string combinations, checking for relevance and altering as required.

Google Scholar was utilised as a secondary source of information, with an online search taking place after a Scopus database search was completed. Google Scholar is a comprehensive online database that includes grey literature as well as academic peer-reviewed articles (Google Scholar, 2019). The author also undertook a standard Google search for grey literature, utilising similar search terms and keywords used in the database searches. It is important to consider the value grey literature can add to a systematic literature review. Grey literature is defined as *“manifold document types produced on all levels of government, academics, business and industry in print and electronic formats that are protected by intellectual property rights, of sufficient quality to be collected and preserved by library holdings or institutional repositories, but not controlled by commercial publishers i.e., where publishing is not the primary activity of the producing body* (Schöpfel, 2010).

Grey literature is produced for a wide range of reasons and is usually not subject to the peer-review or journal application process – this means the quality of the resource cannot be guaranteed. While it is seen as a valuable addition to a systematic literature review, it can introduce challenges such as locating and assessing the literature (Mahood, Van Eerd & Irvin, 2013). Previous literature claims that meta-analyses excluding grey literature have the potential to over-represent studies with statistically-significant findings (Conn, Valentine, Cooper & Rantz, 2003). A key concept of a systematic literature review is a comprehensive, justified process and review. The use of grey literature helps achieve this through assisting in developing a more balanced view of the evidence presented (Paez, 2017). It is clear that grey literature should be included to ensure the existing base of evidence is covered in a systematic literature review. In this study, all literature, irrespective of the source, was put through the same process.

Grey literature has been valuable in this context when addressing the first research question, which is focused on contemporary organisations and their use of organisational flattening. Documents produced for reasons other than publication in a research journal provided valuable supplementary information, particularly on more recent cases of flattening. While a research paper may several years to be completed, accepted and published, grey literature will almost certainly not be required to go through these stages. This allowed the author to include broader and more recent information in this study.

Upon completion of a Scopus search using the produced search string, the author identified eligible papers for use in this study. Once this was completed, the author undertook additional searching using a range of different methods. This first involved forwards and backwards reference checks of all eligible papers, before engaging in a grey literature search using the Google search platform. In addition, relevant academic journals in the research area were examined using Google Scholar, along with the work of prominent authors in the research area. Using the Scopus database in conjunction with a range of additional sources allowed the author to complete an extensive and comprehensive review of the relevant literature.

Eligibility

Resources were identified and obtained from the databases before being subject to screening and review. Resources have been included in this study for the purpose of answering the research questions if they:

- Are written in English.
- Were written in or after the year 1993 and in or before the year 2018.
- Present findings on changes in organisational communication as a result of removal of middle management.
- Present findings on wider internal consequences that occur as a result of an organisational delayering.
- Present findings on contemporary organisations and their use of delayering.

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- Use participants and/or organisations that have been or are still experiencing the removal of middle managers through organisational flattening.
 - Are void of any clear bias that could influence the chosen research method or the reporting of research findings.
 - Are accessible to the author through the various University of Canterbury licenses.

The author decided to include literature from a 25-year period from 1993 to 2018 in this study, for three reasons. Firstly, a key focus of this research is how organisational flattening has been used in contemporary organisations, with contemporary being defined as “*things that are modern and relate to the present time*” (Collins, 2019). Secondly, access to information and technology at both organisational and personal levels increased exponentially throughout the 1990s, due to a change in business environments and adoption of tools like the internet and services such as Google and Hotmail (ABC, 2014), which have significant implications for the nature of work (Stone, Deadrick, Lukaszewski & Johnson, 2015). Thirdly, during a preliminary information search, the author identified a steady increase in literature related to the topic of delayering after the year 1995.

As mentioned, in previous research, delayering is seen as an activity that comes under the wider umbrella of downsizing (Littler, Wiesner & Dunford, 2003). The clear focus of this research is on the activity of delayering, not downsizing (which encompasses a wider range of different activities). The research area of delayering is, while established, not as extensive as the research area on downsizing. This had important implications for the research process and eligibility criteria. A resource was not excluded until the author could confirm it to be ineligible against the criteria stated above. During this process, the author encountered several resources that focused on downsizing in general, however mentioned or analysed the activity of delayering within. Thus although a paper appeared to be focused on downsizing on initial inspection (title, abstract, keywords), it could actually prove valuable for this research by analysing the activity of delayering within. In addition, a resource was included in this study if the activity of organisational delayering was discussed, without explicit mention of the specific term (i.e., if it discussed the activity of reducing or removing middle managers from the organisation).

In the case of this systematic literature review, there are several reasons to exclude any resource that does not analyse, investigate or describe the activity of organisational flattening. Consistency is important as it assists to ensure the author develops a review that can easily be reproduced by someone else (a core feature of a systematic literature review). Also, while downsizing and delayering are related, they are not the same and are therefore two different research areas. A paper that is focused on downsizing is therefore ineligible as the focus of this study is specifically on the activity of delayering. By having a clear boundary regarding the focus, the author could avoid drifting into other potentially unmanageable research areas, (such as downsizing), thus compromising the validity of the review. More importantly, it allowed the focus to be on a specific form of organisational change, avoiding distortion or dilution. An exhaustive systematic literature review allows the reader to understand the current research in an area through the production of a valid, consistent and reproducible study. The eligibility criteria established assisted the author in achieving this.

When engaging in a systematic literature review, objectivity is vital. Researchers and reviewers can introduce bias to a study through their questions, their method and application, and how they come to their conclusions (Bambra, 2011). In this study, the author focused on ensuring any bias did not affect (1) the methods used in the study, (2) the data produced from the study and, (3), the author's conclusions resulting from the study. The author ensured that these conditions were met throughout the systematic review process. It is important to note that the presence of individual author viewpoints did not exclude a resource from this study.

The core focus of this study was to examine and identify the communication implications of flattening the organisation by reducing or removing middle management. Two of the inclusion criteria above are related to this core focus, either directly or indirectly. Firstly, research on changes in organisational communication as a result of internal personnel changes directly address the research objectives of the author. Secondly, findings on wider internal consequences resulting from post-bureaucratic activities such as organisational flattening are indirectly related to the research objectives and area of focus. This is because changes within an organisation can change reporting lines, workplace culture and other factors, all of which affect communication.

It is important to understand any exclusions or restrictions and why these are in place during research decisions, however as this study focuses purely on analysing and synthesising existing research, exclusions and restrictions were not imposed.

- No restrictions or exclusions were placed on the location of the study, the case organisation or the author location. The activity of organisational layering can occur in any geographical location, so exclusion based on location would be obstructive to the outcome of this study.
- No restrictions or exclusions were placed on the methods used in the resources or the style the author uses to draw conclusions in existing research. The goal of this study is to effectively analyse and synthesise a wide, eligible range of existing research in the relevant area. Any exclusion based on this would again be detrimental to this study.
- No restrictions or exclusions were placed on where the resources were published, whether that be an academic journal or not. This is important as the author made the decision to incorporate grey literature into this study, thus removing the requirement of a resource to be published in an academic, peer-reviewed journal.

To be eligible for inclusion in this study, resources must have been identified from the selected databases and/or additional searches and have met the criteria above. From here, they were subjected to screening and review using the systematic literature review research criteria.

Literature Selection

During the initial selection process, the PRISMA 2009 flow diagram was utilised. Upon commencement of the searching stage, details of eligible and potentially eligible resources were transferred and stored in a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. This included any and all resources, irrespective of the method used to identify them. This spreadsheet included the resource title, authors, publisher, date and how the resource was identified. Developed using Moher et al (2009) as a guide, the research process is as follows:

- **Stage 1: Initial screening**

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- The initial screening involved assessing the title and abstract of the article against the inclusion and exclusion criteria identified. An article was included until the author could clearly and confidently identify a reason for exclusion.
 - **Stage 2: Detailed screening**
 - The detailed screening involved analysis and assessment of full articles that were identified in Stage 1. The author again utilised the inclusion and exclusion criteria developed in the early stages of the review process. Resources found to be eligible for a particular research question were tabulated, with reasons. Any articles which became ineligible in this stage were excluded, with reasons.
 - **Stage 3: Data collection**
 - In Stage 3, data was extracted from the articles identified as eligible. Data included the methods used, study population characteristics and research outcomes.
 - **Stage 4: Quality assessment**
 - Resources were assessed on quality and reliability. Poor quality resources were excluded by the author, with reasons. This was particularly important in the case of grey literature, which, while still adding value, may not be as reliable as peer-reviewed articles.
 - **Stage 5: Analysis**
 - The final stage involved summarising and synthesizing the included eligible articles. Information collected in Stage 3 was collated and analysed by the author for use in the Systematic Literature Review, Discussion and Conclusion chapters of this study.

Key search words and terms

In a systematic literature review using the PRISMA framework as a guideline, a key word search string plays a pivotal role. As explained on page 26, the Scopus database (and the relevant search string) was utilised to answer the three research questions. The findings from

this search string, in conjunction with the systematic review process, will be analysed and discussed in Chapter 4.

Before introducing the search string used in this study, it is important to understand the use of certain characters and actions when searching the Scopus database. The use of the following characters allows the author to ensure a rigorous and inclusive search process:

- Double quotations (“ ”) are used to search specifically for the words together.
- An asterisk (*) is used as a wildcard, to return a wider range of results. For example, (“delayer*”) will return results for both “delayer” and “delaying”.
- A question mark (?) is also a wildcard, which can represent any single character. This is useful if a word has multiple spelling variations. For example, “organi?ation” will return results for both “organisation” and “organization”.

Search string and PRISMA flow diagram

The search string used in Scopus was developed through examination and analysis of the relevant research areas, with key words being identified during the completion of the initial narrative literature review. After identifying the relevant keywords, the author used Scopus to test various potential search strings and outcomes to confirm the keyword string shown below. Upon preliminary searching, the author established that many of the search results produced were relevant to more than one of the research questions, and sometimes all three. Due to its structure, one search string using all keywords will produce the same results in Scopus as three separate strings (one for each research question). This feature also helped the author when categorising and tabulating the results (eligible or ineligible and why). The search string used in this study is shown on the following page.

(TITLE-ABS-KEY ("delayer*" OR "flat*") AND TITLE-ABS-KEY ("organi?ation*") OR TITLE-ABS-KEY ("stakeholder*") OR TITLE-ABS-KEY ("communicat*")) AND PUBYEAR > 1992 AND (LIMIT-TO (SUBJAREA , "BUSI")) AND (LIMIT-TO (LANGUAGE , "English"))

It is important to justify certain characteristics of the Scopus search string used in this study, namely the key word “organisation” and the subject area “Business”. For the purpose of this study, the keyword “organisation” is used to represent any type of organisation, company or business. Organisation is defined simply as “*a group of people who work together in an organised way for a shared purpose*” (Cambridge Dictionary, 2019). This study is focused on the communication implications of flattening an organisation, with the aim of encompassing all types of organisations. The use of “company” or “business” during the Scopus search could potentially limit the results to only those organisations primarily focused on making a profit – this is based on the Cambridge Dictionary definition of the two words (Cambridge Dictionary, 2019). It is important that organisations of any type, irrespective of activities and financial motives, be included.

Upon initial testing of various Scopus search terms, it became clear that a limit to the subject area of Business was required for an effective and manageable return from the database. When entering the final search string *without* the subject area limit, 13,811 results were returned. The majority of these results came from six areas: Engineering (6,711), Computer Science (4,645), Physics and Astronomy (2,377), Materials Science (1,951), Mathematics (1,390) and Medicine (1,349). Upon encountering this, it became clear that there was a need to limit to Business, due to both relevance and the author’s time constraints. After editing the search string to include this limit, the number of results returned for initial examination was 529 when the final search was undertaken on February 10th 2019.

Process

The author engaged in what was essentially a two-pronged search strategy, beginning with the Scopus search, before engaging in various other searches and methods to ensure a rigid and exhaustive search. The author began by searching the Scopus online database using the search

string outlined above. Stage 1 was undertaken with an initial screening of the 529 results returned from the search. In this stage, the author analysed the title, abstract and keywords of each resource and if the author was unable to confirm ineligibility (i.e., the resource may be eligible), the paper information was transferred into an Excel spreadsheet entitled “Scopus Results”. This spreadsheet included information on the resource title, year of publication and author/s. After initial screening of the 529 results returned, 89 potentially eligible papers remained in the spreadsheet.

After a detailed screening (Stage 2), each resource was confirmed eligible or ineligible in relation to each of the three research questions, with reasons for inclusion or exclusion. Once this stage was completed:

- 46 resources were excluded – i.e., not related to any of the three research questions
- 43 resources were included – i.e., related to one or more of the three research questions

Of the Scopus results, 25 resources were eligible for RQ1, 23 resources were eligible for RQ2 and 7 resources were eligible for RQ3. Multiple resources were relevant to more than one research question.

After the Scopus search was completed, a range of other searches were undertaken to ensure a comprehensive examination was undertaken and all potentially eligible documents were identified. Resources identified through these sources were added to a separate Microsoft Excel spreadsheet entitled “Additional Sources”. This included forward and backward reference checks, citation list checks, author searches, online database searches and general online analysis. Once this stage was completed, 73 resources were identified as potentially eligible:

- 49 resources were excluded – i.e., not related to any of the three research questions
- 24 resources were included - i.e., related to one or more of the three research questions

Of the resources identified through other means, 11 resources were eligible for RQ1, 16 resources were eligible for RQ2 and 5 resources were eligible for RQ3. Again, multiple resources were utilised for more than one research question. The author now had two core

documents at the centre of this review. The first was the results and status of each of the papers identified as potentially eligible in the Scopus search (the primary search in this review). The second was a document identifying potentially eligible resources identified through various other sources. The total number of resources included in this study specifically for the purpose of answering the research questions was 67 (Appendix 2). These resources directly met the eligibility criteria as discussed earlier in this chapter. The outcome of the search process in the form of a PRISMA flow chart is shown in Figure 1.

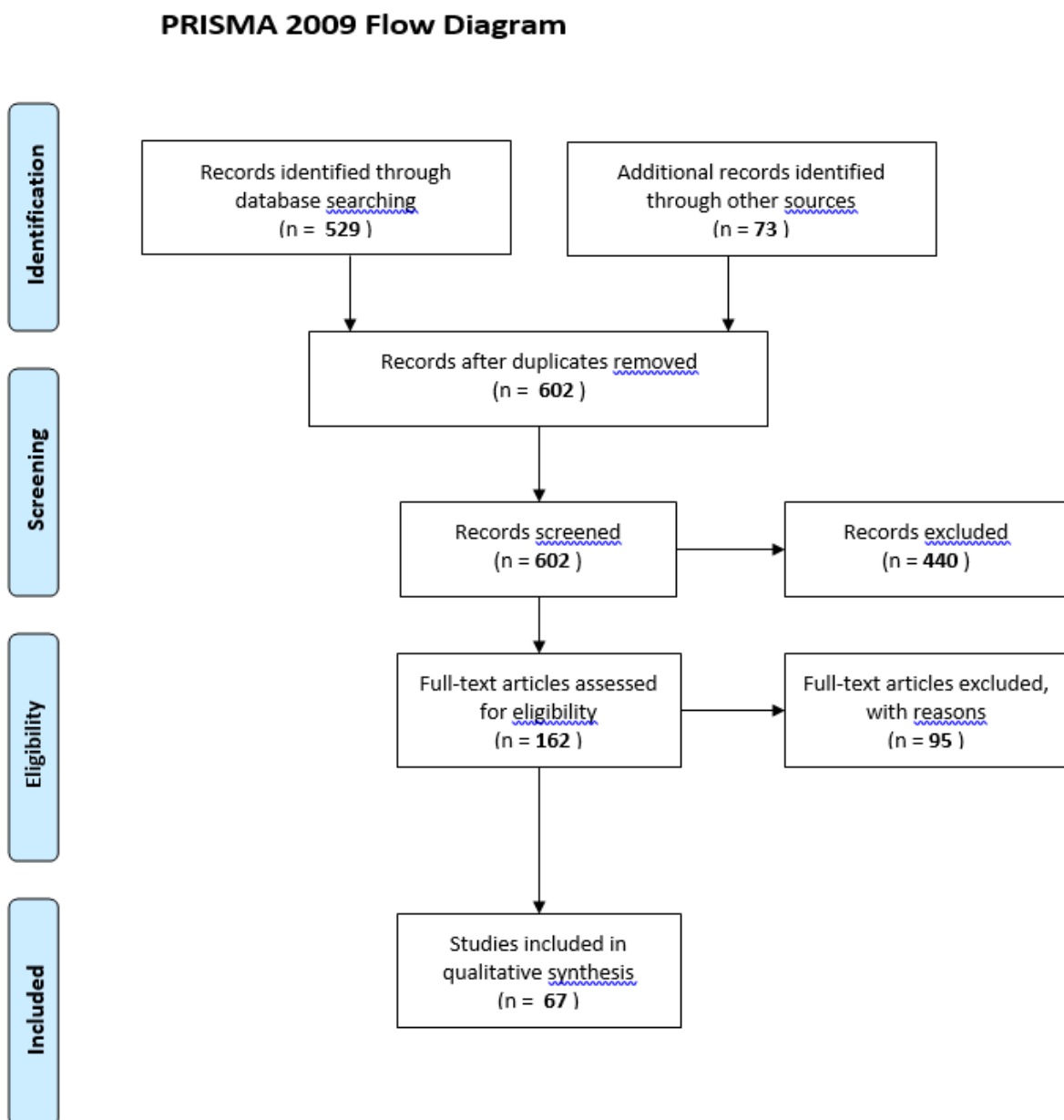


Figure 1: Final PRISMA flow diagram

Several different research methods were used across the eligible resources utilised for this research. Table 1 outlines the research methods used in the eligible papers identified during the search process.

Method	Frequency
Case study	19
Surveys	17
Interviews	14
Questionnaires	9
Review	6
Third-party report	4
Other (simulation or model development)	6

Table 1: Methods used in eligible papers

Due to the nature of the topic, certain methods are utilised more frequently by authors to undertake their research. Case studies proved particularly valuable for the resources utilised in RQ1 (11 papers), as this question revolved around how organisational flattening is being used in contemporary organisations. RQ2 focused on how those within the organisation experience organisational flattening that involves the reduction or removal of middle management. For this research question, interviews (13 papers) and surveys (13 papers) were utilised most frequently. These methods allow for both direct interaction with research subjects and the gathering of information specifically related to the reactions of those affected within. RQ3 was concerned with understanding the consequences for organisational communication of engaging in the specific activity of delaying. As this question was more detailed in nature, surveys (4 papers), case studies (5 papers) and interviews (3 papers) were utilised most frequently. Again, these methods can allow researchers the opportunity to engage directly with research participants and organisations.

Reasons for elimination

This search process began with 602 resources being screened during Stage 1, comprising of both Scopus results and resources identified through other sources. After Stage 1 was

completed, 162 potentially eligible resources remained. It is valuable to understand how this number was reached and discuss common reasons for paper exclusion during Stage 1. Of the Scopus results, a large number featured one or more of the keywords in the title, keywords or abstract but were in fact not relevant to the study area. The eligibility criteria remained a focus during this stage, with the author looking to identify papers that either partly or specifically related to the activity of organisational delayering and how it affects internal stakeholders and organisational communication. A resource was only excluded if the author was sure of ineligibility – if there was any uncertainty, it remained potentially eligible.

An example of a keyword that was responsible for some irrelevant results in the Scopus search was the keyword “flat”. Several resources included the word in the abstracts, for example:

- “The long-term trend of patenting has remained relatively **flat**”.
- “The market of **flat** panel displays is experiencing rapid growth”.
- “... and relatively **flat** utility sales”.

Dealing with ineligible resources is a required aspect of completing a systematic literature review. The author was confident with the search process and outcome, due to a clear focus on completing an extensive search that can be replicated in the future. Once Stage 1 was complete, detailed examination of each resource began. If a paper was excluded at this level, it did not meet the eligibility criteria on relevance, quality or access. During Stage 2, several papers were excluded as they focused on downsizing in general, not delayering. This finding will be examined in the final chapter of this thesis. At each stage of this systematic literature review, the author remained focused on following the eligibility criteria and inclusion/exclusion criteria.

Statement of Ethics

This research adheres to the standards laid down by the University of Canterbury Human Ethics Committee. The study poses no risk to human welfare as the focus of this research is solely on the use of existing data in the area. This existing data is represented as accurately as possible

by the author, as this is in the best interest of all parties. This study was accepted by the University of Canterbury Human Ethics Committee on September 24th 2018 (HEC/2018/89).

Chapter Summary

This chapter began by discussing the research objectives of this study, before examining both narrative and systematic literature reviews and the value they add. The PRISMA framework was introduced as the protocol used to guide this study, along with the rationale behind the research methods selected by the author. The sources of information used in this study were discussed and the eligibility criteria were presented and examined in detail. The literature review and search stages were explained before introducing the characteristics of the resources utilised in this study. The chapter then concluded with details of the Human Ethics Committee application information.

4. Systematic Literature Review

This chapter will present the findings of the extensive systematic literature review undertaken by the author. Firstly, the activity of organisational flattening will be summarised, before examining how it has been used in contemporary organisations. Secondly, the findings will be presented on how internal stakeholders experience flattening that involves the reduction or removal of middle management. Thirdly, the communication consequences of organisational layering will be examined in detail. The chapter will conclude with a summary of the findings in relation to the three key research questions.

RQ1. What is organisational flattening and how has it been used in contemporary organisations?

Defining key terms

Before presenting the results produced for RQ1, it is valuable to define “organisational structure” in the context of this study. The structure of an organisation is defined by Mintzberg (1979, p. 2) as “...*the sum total of the ways which it divides its labour into distinct tasks and then achieves co-ordination among them*”. One type is the hierarchical structure, a multi-layered arrangement of functions that aligns well with the concept of bureaucracy. First described in the early 20th century by German sociologist Max Weber, it has more recently been defined as supporting “*a structure that emphasises specialisation, formalisation, rules and regulations, and centralised authority and decision-making*” (Farmer, Smith & Yellowley, 2012). While traditional hierarchical organisational structures have been developed with this concept in mind, a number of criticisms have emerged. Bureaucracies are increasingly viewed as encouraging poor accountability, excessive reviews, distorted communications and other barriers to efficiency (Buchanan & Huczynski, 2010; Shaw & Schneier, 1993). For the purpose

of this study, a traditional organisation is considered to be one with a hierarchical form that encourages a bureaucratic way of operating.

An important keyword also requires clarity before analysing the findings for RQ1. “Contemporary” is defined as “*happening, existing, living, or coming into being during the same period of time*” (Merriam-Webster, 2019) or “*things that are modern and relate to the present time*” (Collins, 2019). For the purposes of this study, the author will use the Merriam-Webster definition, with the period of time being between 1993 and 2018 (the eligible publication date for selection). It is important to understand that in the case of this study, the word contemporary is used to mean a recent period of time, not organisational design.

What is organisational flattening?

While organisational flattening is defined in numerous ways (Wulf, 2012; Littler, Wiesner & Dunford, 2003; Kyper, Hirsekom, Lloyd & Ebrahimpour, 2003; Cambridge, 2019; AMA Dictionary of Business and Management, 2013; Dictionary of Business, 2006), the same core ideas remain. By analysing how organisational flattening or delayering is defined in research, we can gain a clear understanding of what it is. Several definitions are shown in Table 2 on the following page.

Definition	Reference	Key Term or Terms
<i>“The elimination of layers in a firm’s organisational hierarchy and the broadening of managers’ spans of control”</i>	(Wulf, 2012) <i>The flattened firm: Not as advertised.</i> (p. 5)	Elimination, hierarchy, managers
<i>“The planned vertical compression of managerial levels of hierarchy, involving the wholesale removal of one or more layers of managerial or supervisory staff from the organisation’s payroll”</i>	(Littler, Wiesner & Dunford, 2003) <i>The dynamics of layering: Changing management structures in three countries.</i> (p. 226)	Compression, removal, hierarchy, managerial
<i>“The removal of hierarchical layers in an organisation”</i>	(Kyper, Hirsekom, Lloyd & Ebrahimpour, 2003) <i>Effects of layering on supply chains: A pilot study.</i> (p. 2)	Removal, hierarchical, layers
<i>“The process in which a company or organisation reduces the number of its managers”</i>	(Cambridge, 2019a) <i>Delaying.</i>	Reduces, managers
<i>“Removal of some middle layers of management in an organisation so to create a more flexible and responsible hierarchy”</i>	(Kurian, 2013) <i>Delaying.</i>	Removal, layers, flexible
<i>“The process of making the structure of an organisation simpler and therefore more efficient”</i>	(Dictionary of Business, 2006) <i>Delaying.</i>	Structure, simpler, efficient

Table 2: Delaying defined

When analysing the definitions in Table 2, three key words emerge:

- “Hierarchy” is defined as *“the classification of a group of people according to ability or to economic, social, or professional standing”* (Merriam-Webster, 2019a)
- “Reduction” is defined as *“the act of making something, or of something becoming, smaller in size, amount, degree and importance”* (Cambridge, 2019b).
- “Managerial” is defined as *“relating to management or managers”* (Oxford, 2019a).

This analysis suggests that the activity of organisational flattening involves a reduction in layers within an organisation and therefore an altering of the internal organisational structure. After analysing the definitions in Table 2, the author has defined flattening/delayering for the purpose of this study as *“The planned reduction of layers in an organisational hierarchy, through the removal of managerial levels”*.

When layers are reduced, the span of control within the organisation and amongst the remaining managers is affected (Shaw & Schneier, 1993). Span of control is defined as *“the number of people who report to a manager or supervisor, or the number of workers that a supervisor can effectively manage”* (Cathcart et al, 2004). Fundamentally, the activity of organisational delayering involves reducing management levels and looking to shift responsibility further down the organisation (Shaw & Schneier, 1993). With the working definition of delayering and key characteristics clarified, it is important to understand how organisational delayering as an activity is being used in contemporary organisations.

RQ1: How has organisational flattening been used in contemporary organisations?

Pressures from the external business environment may encourage an organisation to assess their internal efficiency and potentially, their organisational structure (Lee & Edmondson, 2017). Those in favour of delayering an organisational structure claim that it “cuts costs, improves efficiency, empowers employees and improves communications” (Keuning & Opheij, 1994). The aim of this research question is to understand what organisational flattening is and how it has been used in contemporary organisations. After analysing a range of

definitions of delayering / flattening, the author defined this as “*The planned reduction of layers in an organisational hierarchy, through the removal of managerial levels*”. Undertaking an extensive literature search in the area of organisational delayering allowed several clear motives to emerge as to why organisations today are engaging in this activity. Stage 2 of the systematic review process involved a detailed screening of potentially eligible resources identified during both the Scopus database search and additional searches. It was at this stage that three key themes emerged in the literature about why organisations engage in delayering. Each of these three key themes is discussed below, in conjunction with the literature.

Theme 1: Competitiveness

Competitiveness was identified as a key theme by the author, as upon detailed screening of potentially eligible resources, this emerged as a common reason for engaging in delayering activities. This was confirmed during data collection (Stage 3), with a number of papers clearly focussing on the use of delayering as a means for an organisation to either remain competitive or become so. Of the 36 resources used for answering RQ1, 11 referred to competitiveness. These resources are summarised below.

Data from 200 firms was analysed, in conjunction with interviews, by Joyce (2005) to assist in identifying key practices to a successful organisation. A flat, responsive organisational structure that removed barriers to efficiency allows employees to thrive, while producing positive returns for shareholders (Joyce, 2005). Organisations who effectively developed and maintained a flat organisational structure perform better than their industry peers (Joyce, 2005) and often achieve excellent financial savings (Boston Consulting Group, 2015). In addition to potentially improving the financial position of an organisation, a flatter structure allows for better allocation of capital, which leads to an improvement in corporate performance (Zhu & Jiao, 2013).

Less-hierarchical organising is related to an organisation adapting the managerial hierarchy in an effort to move towards decentralised authority (Lee & Edmondson, 2017). While assisting an organisation in remaining competitive and flexible, a flatter structure can also create a more

appealing working environment for those within (Kim, Sting & Loch, 2014). This is clear in the case of Zappos, an organisation that has cemented itself as a self-managing, organic organisational structure (Kumar & Mukherjee, 2018). Processing company W.L Gore & Associates grew from inception with a flat, organic structure at the core, using multiple small units to promote simple, direct communication between employees and their colleagues (Human Resource International Digest, 2015). In this case, some elements of a traditional hierarchy remain, but only in areas that make sense for supporting the business.

External pressures introduce different levels of urgency and uncertainty to an organisation. An increasingly competitive business environment led to the delayering of Taiwanese gifting company Franz, with changes allowing the organisation to thrive by responding rapidly to external market changes (Yuan, Chiu, Kao & Lin, 2009). In customer-facing organisations, those that minimise the operational distance between corporate-level and customer-facing levels are twice as likely as their competitors to become top performers (Boston Consulting Group, 2017). While research has focused on organisational reaction to increased industry competition, it is valuable to consider a wider perspective – that of a nationwide or global financial crisis. 115 domestic and international firms conducting business in Slovakia were analysed with reference to the concept of lean management – reducing hierarchical structures to become and remain more agile as an organisation (Jankelová, Jankurová, Beňová, & Skorková, 2018). Organisational flattening occurred naturally due to a large portion of the work force being let go, but decision-making remained relatively similar (failed to shift downwards) (Jankelová, Jankurová, Beňová, & Skorková, 2018). Where internal cost savings appeared to be the primary motivation for delayering, it typically followed external events such as changing demands or deregulation of markets (Kettley, 1995).

Littler, Wiesner & Dunford (2003) analysed delayering trends in 2,964 organisations across three countries: New Zealand, Australia and South Africa. Survey results showed that the main reason for delayering activities was to improve decision making, with 68% of the firms surveyed stating this was a major objective. This is an interesting finding, as a common reason for delayering is often considered to be cost-reduction (McCann, Morris & Hassard, 2008; Powell, 2002). An earlier study by Littler, Dunford & Bramble (1997) analysed comparative survey data of both public and private organisations in Australia and New Zealand, finding that

44% of organisations engaged in layering activities during the mid-1990's. After undertaking an extensive search as part of this systematic literature review, the author was unable to identify more-recent literature specifically analysing layering trends in a wider context.

Theme 2: Internal efficiency

During the data collection stage, internal efficiency was identified as a key theme because, like competitiveness, it repeatedly appeared when analysing the literature on why organisations engage in layering. Of the 36 resources utilised by the author in RQ1, 16 were relevant to internal efficiency. These resources are summarised below.

Layering and a flatter organisational structure has been the focus of recent research in the production and manufacturing areas. The role of organisational flatness and mass customisation in 317 manufacturing firms worldwide was examined by Zhang, Zhao & Qi, (2014). Findings concluded that organisational flatness improves coordination (and therefore information flow) within an organisation, irrespective of the industry or size (Zhang, Zhao & Qi, 2014). Removing delays due to information processing and multi-level decision making allows an organisation to remain efficient and responsive to change (Guan, 2009). This is echoed in similar research analysing manufacturing plants in eight different countries, which found that an organic structure can positively influence an organisation's mass-customisation capability (Huang, Kristal & Schroeder, 2009).

The concept of a lean organisation became popular in the 1990s and quickly became associated with downsizing and layering (Ingvaldsen & Benders, 2016). The role of supervisors in a lean organisation has been fiercely debated, with authors claiming that to be successful in a production environment, we must understand that the value is added at the point of production, not through the wide range of managerial activities undertaken by both managers and supervisors (Womack, Jones & Roos, 1990; Karlsson & Ahlstrom, 1996).

Glassop (2002) examined team-based work in conjunction with organisational hierarchy and found that firms often removed a formal hierarchy and shifted to a team-based structure, in an aim to increase productivity and decrease employee turnover. A flatter structure means different parties within an organisation are able to easily share and discuss information with each other in real-time, without needing to wait for approval from potentially multiple levels in the hierarchy (therefore increasing internal efficiency) (Zhang, Zhao & Qi, 2014; Bjørnstad & Lichacz, 2013). A reduction in messages flowing up and down within an organisation means information is shared in a more efficient manner (Guan, 2009) and the negative effects of filtering (when information passes through multiple people) can be avoided (Barr & Hanaki, 2008).

In a conceptual paper focused on organisational structure and performance, Gibson, Finnie & Stuart (2015) found that a shift towards a flatter organisational structure allows an organisation to improve communication and decision-making with the assistance of improvements in technology. As technological changes occur and firms invest in information communication technology, they experience more decentralisation in the workplace and ease of information flow increases (Bertschek & Kaiser, 2004). Information flow within an organisation has been the focus of previous literature, particularly in relation to avoiding the negative effects of information flow in a flatter organisation (Safari, Salehzadeh & Ghaziasgar, 2018; Rajan & Wulf, 2006). Efficient information flow is seen by many as a component of increasing productivity within an organisation (Savery & Luks, 2000; Kettley, 1995; Mallak & Watts, 1997). Organisational shifts occur to remain competitive, respond to the external environment and become more efficient internally (Shaw & Schneier, 1993).

Theme 3: Development

Development was identified as a key theme for this research question as, upon full examination of the eligible papers, development (both employee and organisational) emerged as a common reason for delayering within an organisation. Of the 36 resources utilised for answering RQ1, 10 were relevant to development. These resources are summarised below.

Effectively articulating organisational goals and tasks after flattening can lead to clearer role identity and employee development (Accenture, 2016). In contrast, a hierarchical structure is seen as overly bureaucratic, slow to respond to changes in the external environment and perhaps most importantly, ineffective for developing staff and organisational growth (Powell, 2002). A study comparing centralised and decentralised firms found that those with a more decentralised (flatter) structure encourage learning from the bottom up, therefore empowering and developing employees from within (Kim, Sting & Loch, 2014).

Previous research has asserted that flattening an organisational structure shifts responsibility and decision-making down the line to lower-level employees (decentralisation), allowing for personal development and empowerment (Kettley, 1995; Evans, Gunz & Jalland, 1997). For example, Morning Star, the largest tomato processor in the world, allows its employees the responsibility of initiating the hiring process when they feel there is a role that needs to be created or a spot that needs filling (Hamel, 2011). Shifting decision-making down the line offers a range of benefits including in the communication area (Alavi, Wahab, Muhamed & Shirani, 2014; Lashley, 1995). Flatter organisations have the potential to give employees more power throughout the decision-making process, while reducing the number of messages flowing up and down within the organisation (Guan, 2009).

Empowering employees and providing development opportunities is not as easy as simply engaging in the activity of delayering. Employee empowerment, motivation and satisfaction levels of respondents working in flatter organisations were analysed in a 2002 study (Powell, 2002). The findings were clear: employees agreed that there was an increase in accountability and responsibility, however empowerment and employee development benefits can only emerge when an organisational change is developed effectively (Powell, 2002). These findings were echoed when a large sales organisation undertook a structural change after a series of critical events – there is potential for growth within an organisation if every stage is managed well with all stakeholders in mind (Beeler, Zablah & Johnson, 2017). When delayering is managed well, several findings emerge in relation to empowerment, such as an increase in responsible autonomy, sense of ownership, and improved general performance (Lashley, 1995).

Six large Spanish firms were examined to understand the role hierarchy plays in knowledge development (Claver-Cortes, Zaragoza-Saez & Pertusa-Ortega, 2007). The majority of these firms showed increasingly horizontal structures, with a focus on a decentralised decision-making process and employee empowerment. In these cases, flatter and more flexible organisational structures were implemented to foster dialogue and cooperation between team members – therefore promoting knowledge through collective learning (Claver-Cortes, Zaragoza-Saez & Pertusa-Ortega, 2007). In a recent report, KPMG India outlined a wide range of benefits from adopting a horizontal structure and horizontal communication. These include improved coordination, better implementation of decisions, and active knowledge-sharing between employees (KPMG, 2012). For a successful delayering transformation, an organisation needs to accompany the activity with an emphasis on teamwork, cross-functional working and employee empowerment (Kettley, 1995; Powell, 2002). Common reasons for engaging in organisational delayering identified in the literature are summarised in Figure 2 on the following page.

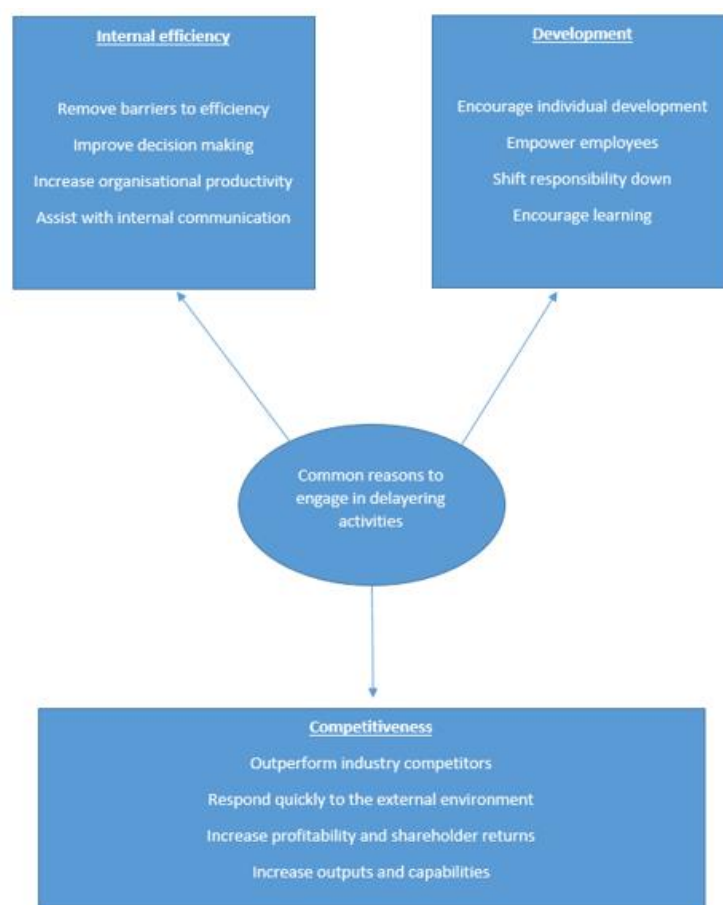


Figure 2: Common reasons for delayering

RQ1: Conclusions

Firstly, an organisation engages in layering to remain competitive within the business environment. Layering allows improved capital allocation (Zhu & Jiao, 2013), the removal of barriers to efficiency (Joyce, 2005) and quicker decision-making in reaction to competitors (Yuan, Chiu, Kao & Lin, 2009; Littler, Wiesner & Dunford, 2003). Secondly, an organisation engages in layering activities to improve internal efficiency. Layering has the ability to improve information flow within an organisation (Huang, Kristal & Schroeder, 2009; Bertschek & Kaiser, 2004), improve production capabilities through removal of non-value adding personnel (Womack, Jones & Roos, 1990; Karlsson & Ahlstrom, 1996) and improve productivity (Savery & Luks, 2000; Kettley, 1995; Mallak & Watts, 1997). The final key theme to appear was that of development. The activity of layering can increase individual employee development and empowerment (Powell, 2002; Hamel, 2011; Lashley, 1995) while fostering dialogue and knowledge development between organisational teams and individual employees (Claver-Cortes, Zaragoza-Saez & Pertusa-Ortega, 2007; Kettley, 1995; Beeler, Zablah & Johnson, 2017). After analysing the literature and the motives behind layering activities in an organisation, we can look to understand the consequences and implications of engaging in these activities.

RQ2. How do internal stakeholders experience organisational flattening that involves reducing or removing middle management?

After understanding why an organisation engages in layering activities, it is valuable to understand how internal stakeholders experience the reduction or removal of middle management from within an organisation. Within an organisation, different stakeholders operate at different levels, with different responsibilities (Freeman & Reed, 1983). Before discussing the literature analysed by the author, stakeholders must be identified and defined. Stakeholders have been defined in slightly different ways over time, as outlined in Table 3.

Definition	Source	Keyword/s
<i>“Any identifiable group or individual who can affect the achievement of an organisation’s objectives or who is affected by the achievement of an organisation’s objectives”</i>	(Freeman & Reed, 1983) <i>Stock and stakeholders.</i> (p. 91)	Individual, affected, objectives
<i>“Any identifiable group or individual on which the organisation is dependent for its continued survival”</i>	(Freeman & Reed, 1983) <i>Stock and stakeholders.</i> (p. 91)	Individual, dependent
<i>“Those who experience or anticipate experiencing potential benefits or dis-benefits as a result of the organisation’s actions”</i>	(Donaldson & Preston, 1995) <i>The stakeholder theory of the corporation.</i> (p. 67)	Benefits, dis-benefits, actions
<i>“Individuals whose interests may be affected as the result of the project execution or project completion”</i>	(Project Management Institute, 2004) <i>A guide to the project management body of knowledge.</i> (p. 16)	Individuals, interests, result
<i>“A person who has or a group of people who have a vested interest in the success of a project and the environment within which the project operates”</i>	(McElroy & Mills, 2007) <i>Managing stakeholders.</i> (p. 7)	Vested interest, person, group
<i>“People who have an interest in a company’s, or organisation’s affairs”</i>	(Collins, 2019a) <i>Stakeholder</i>	Interest, company, organisation

Table 3: Stakeholder defined

For the purpose of this study, stakeholder will be defined as “*Any identifiable group or individual who can affect the achievement of an organisation’s objectives or who is affected by the achievement of an organisation’s objectives*” (Freeman, 1983). This definition was selected by the author due to the focus on organisational objectives, which can be as simple as remaining profitable or, in this case, as complex as engaging in organisational delayering activities – where all stakeholders play a part. After outlining how stakeholders have been defined by some in the past and identifying a definition for use in this study, it is clear that stakeholders offer support and have the ability to affect organisational success and outcomes. It is important to understand the focus of this research question – internal stakeholders. “Internal” is defined as “*existing or situated within the limits or surface of something*” (Merriam-Webster, 2019b). Therefore, the focus and analysis concerns those within an organisation who can affect the achievement of objectives, or who are affected by these objectives.

The findings for this research question will be presented from the perspective of three stakeholder groups: lower-level employees, middle managers and top-level managers. Internal stakeholders are grouped for two key reasons. Firstly, to allow an examination and understanding of the specific reactions and experiences of stakeholders by group, and to assist in making the reporting as clear and concise as possible. Secondly, to allow the reader to examine and compare the differences in reactions and experiences between each group. The three groups of internal stakeholders have been identified based on the literature assessed in this review and have been placed into a group due to a resource either explicitly stating, or describing, their role and level in an organisation. This allows the three internal stakeholder groups in this research question to be accurate, as the resources in this review are either engaging directly in primary research, or in reviewing those who engaged in primary research. Therefore, it is reasonable to expect that the descriptions and portrayals of internal stakeholders and their role/level in an organisation are accurate.

Stakeholder Group 1: Lower-level employees

An employee is defined simply as “*a person who has agreed to be employed to work for some form of payment under a contract of service*” (Employment New Zealand, 2019). In this thesis,

lower-level employees are considered those who engage in assigned activities under the guidance of management, with no responsibility for strategic decision-making or planning. As mentioned, internal stakeholders have been grouped based on the literature reviewed for this research question and the descriptions of those within the studied organisations. Therefore, in this thesis, no distinction based on age or experience of an individual is made – the focus is simply on their level or role within the organisation. It is valuable to consider how lower-level employees experience organisational flattening that involves reducing or removing middle management, as they often experience a wide range of changes involving their activities, their reporting lines and their expectations within the organisation (Accard, 2015; Arnaud, Mills & Legrand, 2016; Appelbaum & Santiago, 1997). Of the 39 resources identified as eligible for RQ2 during the search process, 15 were pertinent partly or primarily to lower-level employees and their experiences.

At an individual level, lower-level employees are being forced to rethink their career plans as opportunities for promotion are often becoming limited and they can no longer rely on the organisation that employs them (Ebadan & Winstanley, 1997; Clarke, 2013; Hassard, Morris & McCann, 2012). In the shorter term, they are forced to diversify to ensure they remain valuable and relevant, while being prepared to move laterally around the organisation (Appelbaum & Santiago, 1997; Ebadan & Winstanley, 1997). With career opportunities effectively compressed, an employee's commitment to an organisation may decrease, with the individual focus being on employability in a wider sense (Littler, Wiesner & Dunford, 2003; Thite, 2001). Promotional opportunities are considered a significant form of recognition within an organisation, so to ensure employees remain committed, organisations must be clear about the promotion process (Shaw, 1993).

As a result of delayering activities, confusion can occur regarding changing reporting lines and relationships within the organisation (Mallak & Watts, 1997). This was indicated by Accard (2015) in the case of two research labs in a pharmaceutical company, when an organisational change led to misunderstandings for lower-level employees and the superiors they were meant to report to. This was aggravated by the fact that, in this case, multiple different groups were interacting regularly, but all were looking to achieve different goals and targets within the organisation (Accard, 2015). In a case study of delayering in a US Army research and

development organisation, nearly 43 percent of employees claimed that their new superiors did not assume their mentorship role as expected, but instead retained their old role (Mallak & Watts, 1997).

A study on employees in the education sector (Powell, 2002) found that all junior staff reported less role clarity following a shift towards a flatter structure. Additionally, lower-level employees felt that job security, career progression and personal remuneration would not improve with the new, flatter structure (Powell, 2002). After a flattening occurs, lower-level employees often experience an increase in responsibility and workload, along with less role clarity (Littler, Wiesner & Dunford, 2003; Lindorff, Worrall & Cooper, 2011). These have important implications for the attitudes of those remaining and aligns with survivor syndrome, which has been defined as *“a generic term that describes a set of attitudes, feelings and perceptions that occur in employees who remain in organisational systems following involuntary employee reductions”* (Noer, 1993). Lower-level employees who remained in an organisation after a structure change (“survivors”) felt a sense of isolation and low morale, as well as increased workload and uncertainty around roles and responsibilities. As a result of this, work-induced stress increased, while motivation, organisational loyalty and individual job security decreased (Sahdev, 1998). Also, a survey of 1321 public and private organisations found that the likelihood of survivor syndrome being present increased in proportion to the frequency of restructuring (Littler, Dunford, Bramble & Hede, 1997). This effect can be avoided through a fair and open approach that allows for employee participation at decision-making stages (Baruch & Hind, 2000). Providing clarity for employees during sequential and significant changes to structure led to no significant difference between morale levels before and after the organisational change (Baruch & Hind, 2000).

When a change is managed responsibly and communicated clearly, employee roles and relationships can align with expectations of the change, and power imbalances can be avoided (Beeler, Zablah & Johnston, 2017; Claver-Cortes, Zaragoza-Saez & Pertusa-Ortega, 2007). Lower-level employees in six large Spanish firms were able to develop professionally in organisations with a clear focus on knowledge transfer and management. As a result of the changes, communication lines opened up and were clear, allowing lower-level employees to transfer knowledge between departments, other levels, and colleagues (Claver-Cortes,

Zaragoza-Saez & Pertusa-Ortega, 2007). If a change process is undertaken without communicating properly with lower-level employees, role clarity decreases and employee stress and negative feelings within the organisation increase (Kubheka, Kholopane & Mbohwa, 2013). Clearly, lower-level employees experience organisational layering in various ways: they are forced to rethink their career plans, deal with changes in their roles and reporting lines, and learn where they stand in the new, layered organisation (Ebadan & Winstanley, 1997; Thite, 2001; Accard, 2015).

Stakeholder Group 2: Middle managers

Middle managers are defined as “*those who perform a co-ordinating role where they mediate, negotiate, and interpret connections between the organisations institutional (strategic) and technical (operational) levels*” (Floyd & Woolridge, 1997). It is valuable to consider how they react to organisational layering, as fundamentally, they are the primary focus of this activity (Littler, Wiesner & Dunford, 2003; Kettley, 1995). Of the 39 resources identified as eligible for RQ2 during the search process, 29 were relevant, either partly or primarily, to middle managers and their experiences.

As a result of layering, there are simply now fewer positions available at the management level, therefore the promotion system becomes far more competitive (Morris, Hassard & McCann, 2006; Littler, Wiesner & Dunford, 2003). Middle managers are forced to understand that their careers are subject to change and they must now chart their own direction, instead of relying on the organisation that employs them (Appelbaum & Santiago, 1997; Collinson & Collinson, 1997; McCann, Morris & Hassard, 2008; Lips-Wiersma & Hall, 2007).

Successive layering has increased the workload of middle managers as they are often required to share out extra responsibilities that arise because of this process (Kettley, 1995). Middle managers are experiencing constant job insecurity and vulnerability due to continual restructuring and layering, especially in larger organisations (McCann, Morris & Hassard, 2008). As they feel their role in the organisation is constantly at risk, they engage in presenteeism to ensure that they are not singled out, or a target for potential future redundancies

(Garrow, 2016; Thomas & Linstead, 2002; Worrall & Cooper, 2004). Presenteeism is defined simply as “*attending work while ill*” (Aronsson, Gustafsson & Dallner, 2000) and can increase in response to organisational activities like downsizing (Johns, 2010).

Reilly, Brett & Stroh (1993) surveyed both top-level managers and middle managers in 20 Fortune 500 companies, with the aim of understanding the impact organisational turbulence has on managers’ attitudes and loyalty. Younger managers were found to be more loyal to their individual careers (as opposed to the organisation), along with managers who had worked for a higher number of companies in the past, while managers at a higher level were found to be more loyal to the organisation (Reilly, Brett & Stroh, 1993). Powell (2002) studied employees at different levels in organisations engaging in the removal of middle management. After delayering, remaining middle managers felt that their role, although defined, was less clear than before the organisational change. Additionally, they (along with lower-level employees) felt that their career prospects and job security would not improve with the new flat structure (Powell, 2002), along with their ability to progress up the hierarchy, which is now more challenging in a delayed organisation (Thomas & Dunkerley, 1999).

McCann, Morris & Hassard (2008) analysed five organisations in the United Kingdom that had embarked on restructuring activities, including delayering. Their interview data indicated that in this case, middle managers felt that their roles and positions were monitored more closely, while their work intensity increased and role clarity decreased (McCann, Morris & Hassard, 2008). In addition, middle managers may be resentful because their career prospects have diminished as a result of an organisational delayering (Hassard, Morris & McCann, 2012; Ebadan & Winstanley, 1997; McCann, Morris & Hassard, 2008). They are expected to adapt and develop, and often, develop laterally (as opposed to vertically in the ‘old’ organisation) (Hassard, Morris & McCann, 2012). Increasingly, individual managers are using mentoring and coaching to develop their skills as more traditional methods of individual development may now be lacking in their organisation (Whymark & Ellis, 1999; Martin, Riemens & Wajcman, 2000). They are expected to achieve more with less, and work with an increased load and potentially longer hours (Kettley, 1995; Dunford, Bramble & Littler, 1998). When organisational structures change, the way managers react and succeed is influenced by the type

of manager they are. The most successful are those who can adapt and continue to learn within an organisation (Kainen & Boyd, 2007).

It is often difficult for managers to find clarity as to their role and influence during and after an organisation engages in delayering (Thornhill, Saunders & Stead, 1997; Kettley, 1995; Accard, 2015; Worrall, Cooper & Campbell, 2000). They are often expected to manage laterally and influence others within the organisation without the same formal authority to command (Kettley, 1995; Rajan & Wulf, 2006). Middle managers who are identified as surplus during the process tend to exhibit highly stressed behaviour that can have long-term negative consequences for both the individual and the organisation (Armstrong-Stassen, 1997). For remaining middle managers, task-loads often increase along with their span of control, sometimes leading to an increase in work-related stress (Kettley, 1995; Thomas & Dunkerley, 1999; Kubheka, Kholopane & Mbohwa, 2013).

Middle managers remaining in the organisation experience isolation, a drop in morale, and an increased uncertainty regarding their future within the organisation (Sahdev, 1998). They also often experience continual restructuring and high managerial churn (Littler & Innes, 2004, Littler, Dunford, Bramble & Hede, 1997). Across a range of Australian organisations and managers surveyed, managerial churn was placed at 25% - this means that a manager had witnessed one in four of their colleagues either losing their jobs or changing job roles in the past (Littler & Innes, 2004). An open approach to organisational delayering is important and can minimise the risks of negative feelings towards the organisation felt by middle managers and lower-level employees (Baruch & Hind, 2000). If an organisational change such as delayering is not communicated effectively and openly, the consequences can be severe (Lindorff, Worrall & Cooper, 2011). As they are fundamentally the focus of organisational delayering activities, middle managers experience a wide range of reactions in relation to these activities (Littler & Innes, 2004; Kettley, 1995). They now have less opportunity to move upwards within an organisation, while having an increased workload and less role clarity (Kettley, 1995; Thornhill, Saunders & Stead, 1997; Thomas & Dunkerley, 1999). These factors all have implications for the future of both the individual manager and the organisation in focus (Armstrong-Stassen, 1997).

Stakeholder Group 3: Top-level managers

A top-level (or senior) manager is defined as “*a manager who has a substantial role in formulating the objectives and policy of the organisation*” (Financial Dictionary, 2019). They often play a pivotal role in change processes such as delayering (Kettley, 1995), so understanding how they experience organisational flattening through reduction or removal of middle management is valuable. Of the 39 resources identified as eligible for RQ2 during the search process, 7 were relevant partly or primarily to top-level managers and their experiences related to organisational delayering.

As a result of the trend towards a flatter organisational structure, top-level managers now have a larger number of people reporting directly to them (their span of control increases) (Rajan & Wulf, 2006; Wulf, 2012). This increase is substantial, with the number of positions reporting directly to the CEO doubling from 5 to 10 between the mid-1980s the mid-2000s (Guadalupe, Li & Wulf, 2013). At the same time, the number of levels between the top and the bottom of the organisation has decreased – this is a direct consequence of the removal of management positions focussing on intermediary activities (such as Chief Operations Officer). When this occurs, the workload of the top-level manager increases due to more involvement with the day-to-day running of the organisation (Rajan & Wulf, 2006). This does not align with what many identify as a key factor of delayering – pushing decision-making activities down the hierarchy (Wulf, 2012).

As organisations shift towards a flatter, leaner structure, senior managers often experience a sharp increase in workload, which can lead to burnout and other negative consequences (Meacheam, 2012). Top-level managers are expected to be constantly available to cater to the organisation and this can include activities like international travel, mediation, and damage control (Hobson & Meacheam, 2004). Like middle managers, top-level managers are expected to remain loyal to the organisation during times of upheaval and change, however they are more comfortable with their marketability in the job market (Martin, Riemens & Wajcman, 2000).

If the delayering process is not managed and communicated correctly (at all levels) confusion can arise, particularly around power and influence in an organisation (Kettley, 1995). When a sales organisation adopted a flatter organisational structure, several issues emerged around reporting lines and power within the organisation (Beeler, Zablah & Johnston, 2017). Senior salespeople (not managers) were highly influential within the organisation due to involvement in a series of crucial sales. There was a clear power imbalance between top salespeople and top-level managers as a result of failure to provide clarity during the process (Beeler, Zablah & Johnston, 2017). Clarity at all levels is a requirement for organisational delayering to be successful and avoid confusion around influence, power, and reporting lines (Kettley, 1995). As for other internal stakeholders, there are a range of consequences for top-level managers when an organisation engages in flattening activities. Top-level managers' span of control and workload increases, while confusion may occur around roles, power and influence in a newer, flatter organisation (Rajan & Wulf, 2012; Meacheam, 2012). They are expected to remain loyal to an organisation while being flexible and accessible in times of change (Hobson & Meacheam, 2004; Martin, Riemens & Wajcman, 2000).

RQ2: Conclusions

It is valuable to consider how internal stakeholders experience and react to organisational flattening that involves reducing or removing middle management. After completing an extensive search process (as outlined in the Methodology), 39 resources were identified as eligible for use in answering this research question. Internal stakeholders, including lower-level employees, middle managers and top-level managers, experience a range of reactions to organisational flattening activities, as shown in Table 4. Experiences and reactions of internal stakeholders were identified and recorded upon full reading of the 39 papers identified as eligible for this research question. Experiences and reactions of the stakeholders were included if they were either explained or explicitly mentioned within these resources, along with their position or level within an organisation (lower-level employees, middle management or top-level management).

Experiences and reactions of internal stakeholders	Lower-level employees	Middle managers	Top-level managers
Confusion regarding reporting lines, relationships and influence			
Career development opportunities decrease			
Resentment and negative feelings towards organisation			
Conflict between individual and organisational goals			
Less role clarity			
Less job security			
Increase in workload			
Increase in span of control			
Decrease in organisational loyalty			
Increase in work-related stress			
Decrease in morale and motivation			
Feelings of isolation			
Differences between planned actions and outcomes			
Presenteeism			
Focus on taking individual responsibility for career development			
Communication lines open and develop			

Table 4: Internal stakeholder experiences and reactions

By analysing these reactions and how often they arise in different stakeholders, we can understand which feelings occur more than others and therefore may suggest a focus for organisations engaging in delayering in the future. Several similarities emerge on analysing the findings from the literature. Across all levels (lower-level employees, middle managers and top-level managers), stakeholders experience less role clarity as result of organisational flattening (Powell, 2002; Littler, Wiesner & Dunford, 2003). Organisational communication lines develop but confusion regarding reporting lines, influence, power, and relationships remains (Kubheka, Kholopane & Mbohwa, 2013; Beeler, Zablah & Johnston, 2017). Both lower-level employees and middle managers can often no longer rely on the organisation for career development opportunities as roles have been compressed or removed as a result of delayering (Ebadan, 1997; McCann, 2008; Morris, Hassard & McCann, 2006). Both middle managers and top-level managers experience an increase in workload, work-related stress and span of control (Kettley, 1995; Rajan & Wulf, 2006; Wulf, 2012), while all stakeholders experience some form of conflict between their own individual goals and the goals of the organisation (Whymark & Ellis, 1999; Thomas & Dunkerley, 1999). After understanding how

those within an organisation react to and experience organisational flattening activities, we can delve deeper to attempt to understand the communication implications of these activities.

RQ3. What are the consequences for organisational communication of flattening the organisational structure?

A key goal of this thesis is to understand how organisational layering through the reduction or removal of middle managers affects communication. After analysing the experiences of internal stakeholders as a result of organisational flattening, it is valuable to delve deeper and understand the consequences for communication. A common reason for engaging in layering activities is to improve communication within an organisation (Gibson, Finnie & Stuart, 2015; Mallak & Watts, 1997; Kettley, 1995). This research question aims to understand the consequences for organisational communication of engaging in organisational layering. The key word “consequence” is defined by Merriam-Webster (2019c) as “*something produced by a cause or necessarily following from a set of conditions*”.

Before examining the consequences for organisational communication of layering, an overview of organisational communication and the “communication constitutes the organisation” (CCO) perspective is required. Organisational communication occurs internally and externally and between those at every level of an organisation – through horizontal communication between members at the same level and leader-member communication between members at different levels (Elving, 2005). As identified in the initial literature review, communication plays a key role in the development and implementation of both the day-to-day activities of the organisation and additional activities such as change initiatives (Bryant & Stensaker, 2011; Bies, 2013).

The CCO (“communication constitutes the organisation”) perspective expands on this idea, proposing that communication is not only an instrument for organising, but that communication in its various forms actually constitutes the organisation (Sillince, 2010; Schoeneborn et al, 2014). Scholars have claimed that communication cannot be considered simply as one factor within an organisation – it is in fact the means by which organisations are established,

composed, designed and sustained (Cooren, Kuhn, Cornelissen & Clark, 2011). Middle managers are often the target of organisational layering activities, but are also often the main contributors to organisational communication (Balogun, 2003; Skrabec, 2001). Understanding the general concept of the CCO perspective and the role of communication in organisations is valuable when analysing the effects of organisational layering on communication. The key word “communication” is defined by Merriam-Webster (2019d) simply as “*a process by which information is exchanged between individuals through a common system of symbols, signs, or behaviour*”. It is important to acknowledge that this definition is somewhat limited, being founded on the send-receive model of communication which has now proven inadequate, with regard to the CCO perspective (Sillince, 2010; Schoeneborn et al, 2014). This perspective claims that communication is more than just sending and receiving – it is about the co-construction of meaning and the idea that the organisation is formed and reformed in the process of organising (Cooren, Kuhn, Cornelissen & Clark, 2011).

While consequences often align with negative aspects, this is not always the case. In analysing the literature relating to this research question, the author identified both positive and negative consequences for organisational communication of flattening the organisational structure. After completing an extensive search process, as outlined in the Methodology chapter, 12 eligible resources were identified that related either specifically or partly to organisational layering and communication.

An organic, flatter structure allows for more flexible communication and knowledge transfer between stakeholders within the organisation (Claver-Cortes, Zaragoza-Saez & Pertusa-Ortega, 2007). Decisions are made in a more efficient manner while bureaucratic barriers are removed, which in turn allows for communication to become less formal (Alavi, Wahab, Muhamed & Shirani, 2014). When these barriers are removed and layering activities are undertaken in an efficient manner, internal stakeholders can cope with stress and uncertainty due to improved internal communications and information flow (Thornhill, Saunders & Stead, 1997; Alavi, Wahab, Muhamed & Shirani, 2014). More frequent communications and efficient information flow throughout an organisation can lead to increased productivity and stakeholder coordination (Bertschek & Kaiser, 2004). When decision-making shifts to lower-level employees (which is common, but not always the case), groups are required to engage in more

frequent communication, to achieve the required objectives (Kubheka, Kholopane & Mbohwa, 2013; Accard, 2015).

A hierarchical, bureaucratic structure creates a context to control information flow within an organisation but can also have a negative effect on knowledge transfer and interactions between internal stakeholders (Alavi, Wahab, Muhamed & Shirani, 2014; Claver-Cortes, Zaragoza-Saez & Pertusa-Ortega, 2007). In contrast, a flatter structure encourages agility within the organisation, leading to more efficient information flow, but with less regulation on such information. This is because, fundamentally, a flatter structure leads to more stakeholders being involved in decision-making, thereby increasing the number of messages flowing throughout the organisation (Alavi, Wahab, Muhamed & Shirani, 2014). This has important consequences in times of uncertainty, when it may cause employee morale to decrease and individual stress levels to increase (Ebadan & Winstanley, 1997).

Improving internal communication is not always a clear focus or goal of engaging in delayering activities (Littler, Wiesner & Dunford, 2003). This is evident from a number of issues that arise, particularly in relation to job roles which, in turn, affect internal communication. Issues can arise as to whether a manager is clear about their new role or not. After delayering, managers often saw themselves as more accessible, but this was not the feeling of those staff below them (Powell, 2002). In a survey of 2,964 organisations across Australia, New Zealand and South Africa, Littler, Wiesner & Dunford (2003) found that it is common for middle managers to experience low role clarity and a decrease in morale, which logically, may negatively affect communication and information flow within an organisation. Managers may feel that they are clear about their role but are not experiencing the communication benefits from their subordinates, because the subordinates do not believe the power dynamics have changed within a new structure. This leaves all parties disappointed with internal communications (Powell, 2002; Littler, Wiesner & Dunford, 2003; Ebadan & Winstanley, 1997). More specifically, during a change initiative, communication challenges, such as negative or conflicting narratives within communication lines may arise, as a result of frustration, uncertainty for the future, and a lack of clarity around organisational goals (Arnaud, Mills & Legrand, 2016).

The literature utilised in answering this research question confirms that reporting lines change as a result of organisational layering activities (Alavi, Wahab, Muhamed & Shirani, 2014; Powell, 2002). If decision-making shifts downwards, lower-level employees begin to interact more, with the intention of reaching decisions regarding organisational activities (Kubheka, Kholopane & Mbohwa, 2013). If decision-making shifts upwards, senior managers such as the Chief Executive Officer experience an increase in direct reports (Rajan & Wulf, 2006). This introduces an important point to consider – having more direct reports may mean top-level managers have less time available to engage in internal communication with subordinates (Wulf, 2012).

RQ3: Conclusions

Although the literature focused on communication and organisational layering is somewhat limited, it has been possible in this review to identify several consequences resulting from these activities. A flatter structure allows for both a smoother information flow and an increase in communication between internal stakeholders (Thornhill, Saunders & Stead, 1997; Claver-Cortes, Zaragoza-Saez & Pertusa-Ortega, 2007). While this can mean an increase in productivity, it also means an organisation often has less control over the internal flow of information (Alavi, Wahab, Muhamed & Shirani, 2014). This can prove problematic if negative themes or narratives (Arnaud, Mills & Legrand, 2016) flow through the organisation. Reasons for this can include low employee morale, issues with role clarity, and an increase in work-related stress (Ebadan & Winstanley, 1997; Powell, 2002). As a result of organisational layering, internal reporting lines change, which has important implications for the strategic direction of an organisation (Wulf, 2012; Kubheka, Kholopane & Mbohwa, 2013; Rajan & Wulf, 2006; Arnaud, Mills & Legrand, 2016).

Chapter Summary

An organisation engages in layering activities to remain competitive, to increase internal efficiencies, and for individual and organisational development (Powell, 2002). Layering

allows for better allocation of capital (Zhu & Jiao, 2013), for the removal of barriers to efficiency (Joyce, 2005) and for the ability to make decisions faster and more efficiently (Yuan, Chiu, Kao & Lin, 2009; Littler, Wiesner & Dunford, 2003). Delayering improves information flow within an organisation (Huang, Kristal & Schroeder, 2009; Bertschek & Kaiser, 2004), improves production capabilities through removal of non-value adding personnel (Womack, Jones & Roos, 1990; Karlsson & Ahlstrom, 1996) and improves internal productivity (Savery & Luks, 2000; Kettley, 1995; Mallak & Watts, 1997). Delayering activities can increase individual employee development and empowerment (Powell, 2002; Hamel, 2011; Lashley, 1995) while fostering dialogue and knowledge development between organisational teams and employees (Claver-Cortes, Zaragoza-Saez & Pertusa-Ortega, 2007; Kettley, 1995; Beeler, Zablah & Johnson, 2017).

Across all levels (lower-level employees, middle managers and top-level managers), stakeholders experience less role clarity as result of organisational flattening (Powell, 2002; Littler, Wiesner & Dunford, 2003). Organisational communication lines expand and develop, but confusion regarding reporting lines, influence, power and relationships remain (Kubheka, Kholopane & Mbohwa, 2013; Beeler, Zablah & Johnston, 2017). Lower-level employees and middle managers often can no longer rely on the organisation for career development opportunities, as these opportunities have been compressed and removed as a result of delayering (Ebadan & Winstanley, 1997; McCann, 2008; Morris, Hassard & McCann, 2006). Middle managers and top-level managers experience an increase in workload, work-related stress and span of control (Kettley, 1995; Rajan & Wulf, 2006; Wulf, 2012), while all stakeholders experience some form of conflict between their own individual goals and the goals of the organisation (Whymark & Ellis, 1999; Thomas & Dunkerley, 1999).

As a result of organisational delayering, internal reporting lines change, which has important implications for the strategic direction of an organisation (Wulf, 2012; Kubheka, Kholopane & Mbohwa, 2013; Rajan & Wulf, 2006; Arnaud, Mills & Legrand, 2016). Smoother information flow occurs as a result of a flatter structure (Thornhill, Saunders & Stead, 1997; Claver-Cortes, Zaragoza-Saez & Pertusa-Ortega, 2007), but it can also lead to challenges arising from negative themes or narratives flowing throughout the organisation (Arnaud, Mills & Legrand, 2016), which can occur due to low employee morale, issues with role clarity, and increased work-

related stress (Ebadan & Winstanley, 1997; Powell, 2002). While a flatter structure can mean an increase in productivity, it can also mean an organisation has less control over the internal flow of information (Alavi, Wahab, Muhamed & Shirani, 2014).

This chapter began by summarising the activity of organisational delayering and examining how it has been used in contemporary organisations. Following this, the review findings on how internal stakeholders experience flattening that involves the reduction or removal of middle management were presented. The final research question was then answered, with the communication consequences of organisational delayering being examined in detail. This chapter concluded with a summary of findings in relation to the three research questions.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

This chapter will begin by discussing the purpose of this study and the research objectives. Next, the findings from the systematic literature review will be discussed with a focus on the characteristics of the resources utilised and how they assisted in answering the research questions. The author will then discuss the practical and theoretical implications of this research, the research limitations, and suggestions for future research. Lastly, the author will conclude this study.

Research purpose and objectives

This study was undertaken as a result of identifying a clear literature gap in the research area. It aimed to gather, synthesise and summarise evidence identified through a comprehensive systematic literature review, with a focus on assessing the communication implications of undertaking organisational flattening or layering activities.

Research findings

This systematic literature review allowed the author to answer the three research questions by analysing the 67 total resources that were identified as eligible during the search process. From the beginning, it was clear that the focus was specifically on layering, not downsizing. Despite this, the author still encountered several papers that were focused on downsizing (and therefore deemed ineligible) during the search process. There may be a relatively simple reason for this. When examining preliminary data and engaging in an initial literature review, it soon became clear that in many cases, research has failed to properly distinguish the difference between downsizing and layering – the two activities are often grouped together.

As identified in the body of this report, downsizing and its implications for communication has been extensively researched in current literature. The objective of this thesis was to specifically focus on the activity of layering, because of its relationship to line of command and

information flow within organisations. The introduction of literature on any related areas of organisational change research (e.g., downsizing, restructuring) into the search process would have undoubtedly had a negative impact on the quality and outcome of this study. This is because delayering is a distinctive form of organisational change that cannot be fully understood by conflating it with any form of change that reduces staff numbers.

There were several areas where resources were identified as scant:

- The literature on how top-level managers experience flattening is very limited. This is interesting as it is almost always top-level managers who are responsible for the strategic direction of the organisation (Wulf, 2012). Fundamentally, middle managers are the focus of organisational flattening, so it is understandable that they were the most represented stakeholders identified in the literature available to answer RQ2.
- While there is extensive literature on organisational change and its relationship to and effect on communication, the review found there is a scarcity of research specifically addressing communication and organisational delayering. The activity of delayering, in particular, introduces a range of challenges for an organisation to consider (Littler, Wiesner & Dunford, 2003), not least of these in relation to communication. There is obviously a need for more research that specifically addresses the consequences for organisational communication of delayering.
- There is no specific focus on how communication is affected when middle managers, who are considered as vital for communications, leave an organisation.
- Finally, there is no clear research focus on communication efficiency after a delayering and within a flatter structure. This can include (but is not limited to) changes to the transfer of the information itself, along with any changes in the type of communication. This finding may be because this particular research area is still developing, along with the fact that conducting this type of research would be highly challenging.

An interesting finding emerged relating to organisational decision-making. If decision-making shifts downwards, lower-level employees are essentially given more responsibility within an organisation, while often having less chance of an internal promotion (due to the reduction in hierarchical levels) (Ebadan & Winstanley, 1997). If decision-making shifts upwards to top-level managers, their workload will increase, due to a larger number of internal stakeholders

reporting to them. This can have a negative effect on the decision-making abilities of a top-level manager, as constant time constraints may cause the quality of the information they receive to drop (Rajan & Wulf, 2006).

Analysing the various findings across RQ1 and RQ2 in conjunction with organisational communication produces an interesting finding for consideration. Failure to communicate a change effectively can lead to those within the organisation having low role clarity and failing to shift into their new role (Ebadan & Winstanley, 1997; Accard, 2015). This has the potential to negatively affect those around them as low morale and increased work-related stress leads to negative information and communication themes flowing freely throughout the now flatter organisation. Essentially, failure to communicate a change initiative effectively can have unfortunate consequences at all levels.

After analysing the research area in detail, two interesting paradoxes emerge:

- Middle managers are considered essential to internal organisational communication, yet they are a target of post-bureaucratic activities like delayering (Skrabec, 2001, Cascio, 1993).
- In the early stages of organisational delayering activities, middle managers may be in fact communicating their own impending departure from the organisation.

In summary, this systematic literature review produced several valuable findings:

- Organisations engage in organisational delayering activities to remain competitive, to become more efficient internally, and to empower and develop internal stakeholders (Zhu & Jiao, 2013; Kettley, 2005; Shaw & Schneier, 1993).
- All stakeholders experience less role clarity as a result of delayering, as reporting lines and responsibilities change (Powell, 2002; Littler, Wiesner & Dunford, 2003).
- Lower-level employees can no longer rely on the organisation for career development, as their opportunities for internal promotions decrease (McCann, Morris & Hassard, 2008).

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- Middle-managers and top-level employees experience an increase in workload and work-related stress, along with a drop in morale (Rajan & Wulf, 2006; Ebadan & Winstanley, 1997).
 - A flatter organisational structure allows for smoother information flow and increased frequency of communication between internal stakeholders (Thornhill, Saunders & Stead, 1997). While information flow is smoother, in a flat structure, the organisation has less control over the messages within the organisation (Alavi, Wahab, Muhamed & Shirani, 2014).
 - There is a clear lack of research on the effects of delayering for organisational communication. Examination of previous literature shows that scholars are often unable to properly distinguish between downsizing and delayering, each of which have different challenges and consequences (Littler, Wiesner & Dunford, 2003). It seems scholars have not yet appreciated the need to focus specifically on delayering as a unique form of organisational change, which presents a significant research opportunity in an increasingly relevant area.

Practical and theoretical implications

This study makes a valuable contribution in a practical sense as it effectively summarises and synthesizes research on the activity of organisational delayering and the consequences, especially for organisational communication. This thesis will prove valuable to practitioners looking to learn about or engage in organisational delayering activities, by providing concise, understandable findings to assist them. Although the author concluded that the current literature on delayering and communication is clearly lacking, links can still be made by combining the findings from each research question. On a practical level, this thesis can be utilised as an informational resource for those looking to engage in these activities.

This study was undertaken with the aim of examining and understanding the existing literature in the research area of organisational delayering and communication. This was achieved through focussing specifically on the activity of delayering and the communication consequences of this. Although the author has produced an extensive systematic literature review on the current research in the area, research on the effects of delayering on

organisational communication is scant. It seems scholars have not yet appreciated the need to focus specifically on layering as a unique form of organisational change. Given the popularity of moving toward post-bureaucratic organisational structures, this review has thus revealed a significant research opportunity.

Research limitations and suggestions for future research

As with all academic research, there are limitations. In the case of this study, the number of resources utilised for the final research question was very low. This simply reflects the state of the current research area and signals a significant opportunity for further research at a time when the effects of layering on communication is a very relevant topic. Practitioners currently must refer to literature that does not distinguish layering from downsizing and restructuring. This is unfortunate as downsizing and restructuring may not have the same objectives as layering, which, the literature shows, is often undertaken to empower, simplify and increase communication efficiency (Powell, 2002; Mallak & Watts, 1997; Bertschek & Kaiser, 2004).

This thesis, and the systematic review it presents, will provide a valuable addition to the research area and can be used to assist in the development of more in-depth research in the future that is specifically focused on the communication effects of layering. A series of studies directly addressing organisational layering, how it alters internal communication, and whether it achieves the organisation's strategic change objectives, would be highly valuable. There is clearly a need for more empirical studies to support theory and practice.

A further study analysing one or more of the paradoxes identified in this study could also prove valuable. For example, a focus on the trade-off between a flatter organisation with no middle managers but no control over communication, versus a more traditional organisation with middle managers and control over communication. In summary, the research on organisational layering and communication is severely lacking, so a focus on this in the future will prove highly valuable, particularly given that post-bureaucratic organisational structures are becoming increasingly favoured over more hierarchical forms (Lee & Edmondson, 2017).

Conclusion

The goal of this thesis was to understand the activity of organisational layering, how it affects internal stakeholders, and how it influences communication, using a systematic review of the extant literature. By undertaking a comprehensive systematic literature review, the author was able to produce a range of valuable findings, using a process that was clear, concise and replicable, and that went beyond a narrative review. Not only does this study provide an in-depth review of the literature addressing the nature of layering and how it is used in organisations (RQ1 and RQ2) but, most significantly, it highlights the scarcity of literature addressing how layering affects organisational communication (RQ3). It therefore provides clear evidence that there is an outstanding research opportunity available to explore how layering affects organisational communication. Such research would provide a valuable empirical foundation to guide an organisational flattening and a shift towards a post-bureaucratic organisational form.

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7. Appendices

PRISMA-P (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic review and Meta-Analysis Protocols) 2015 checklist: recommended items to address in a systematic review protocol*

Section and topic	Item No	Checklist item
ADMINISTRATIVE INFORMATION		
Title:		
Identification	1a	Identify the report as a protocol of a systematic review
Update	1b	If the protocol is for an update of a previous systematic review, identify as such
Registration	2	If registered, provide the name of the registry (such as PROSPERO) and registration number
Authors:		
Contact	3a	Provide name, institutional affiliation, e-mail address of all protocol authors; provide physical mailing address of corresponding author
Contributions	3b	Describe contributions of protocol authors and identify the guarantor of the review
Amendments	4	If the protocol represents an amendment of a previously completed or published protocol, identify as such and list changes; otherwise, state plan for documenting important protocol amendments
Support:		
Sources	5a	Indicate sources of financial or other support for the review
Sponsor	5b	Provide name for the review funder and/or sponsor
Role of sponsor or funder	5c	Describe roles of funder(s), sponsor(s), and/or institution(s), if any, in developing the protocol
INTRODUCTION		
Rationale	6	Describe the rationale for the review in the context of what is already known
Objectives	7	Provide an explicit statement of the question(s) the review will address with reference to participants, interventions, comparators, and outcomes (PICO)
METHODS		
Eligibility criteria	8	Specify the study characteristics (such as PICO, study design, setting, time frame) and report characteristics (such as years considered, language, publication status) to be used as criteria for eligibility for the review
Information sources	9	Describe all intended information sources (such as electronic databases, contact with study authors, trial registers or other grey literature sources) with planned dates of coverage
Search strategy	10	Present draft of search strategy to be used for at least one electronic database, including planned limits, such that it could be repeated
Study records:		
Data management	11a	Describe the mechanism(s) that will be used to manage records and data throughout the review
Selection process	11b	State the process that will be used for selecting studies (such as two independent reviewers) through each phase of the review (that is, screening, eligibility and inclusion in meta-analysis)
Data collection process	11c	Describe planned method of extracting data from reports (such as piloting forms, done independently, in duplicate), any processes for obtaining and confirming data from investigators
Data items	12	List and define all variables for which data will be sought (such as PICO items, funding sources), any pre-planned data assumptions and simplifications
Outcomes and prioritization	13	List and define all outcomes for which data will be sought, including prioritization of main and additional outcomes, with rationale
Risk of bias in individual studies	14	Describe anticipated methods for assessing risk of bias of individual studies, including whether this will be done at the outcome or study level, or both; state how this information will be used in data synthesis
Data synthesis	15a	Describe criteria under which study data will be quantitatively synthesised
	15b	If data are appropriate for quantitative synthesis, describe planned summary measures, methods of handling data and methods of combining data from studies, including any planned exploration of consistency (such as I^2 , Kendall's τ)
	15c	Describe any proposed additional analyses (such as sensitivity or subgroup analyses, meta-regression)
	15d	If quantitative synthesis is not appropriate, describe the type of summary planned
Meta-bias(es)	16	Specify any planned assessment of meta-bias(es) (such as publication bias across studies, selective reporting within studies)
Confidence in cumulative evidence	17	Describe how the strength of the body of evidence will be assessed (such as GRADE)

* It is strongly recommended that this checklist be read in conjunction with the PRISMA-P Explanation and Elaboration (cite when available) for important clarification on the items. Amendments to a review protocol should be tracked and dated. The copyright for PRISMA-P (including checklist) is held by the PRISMA-P Group and is distributed under a Creative Commons Attribution Licence 4.0.

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Appendix 1: PRISMA-P Checklist

	<i>Eligible</i>	<i>Ineligible</i>	<i>Total</i>
<i>Scopus</i>	43	46	89
<i>Additional Searches</i>	24	49	73
<i>Total</i>	67	95	162

	<i>RQ1</i>	<i>RQ2</i>	<i>RQ3</i>
<i>Scopus</i>	25	23	7
<i>Additional Searches</i>	11	16	5
<i>Total</i>	36	39	12

Appendix 2: Sources utilised

PRISMA 2009 Flow Diagram

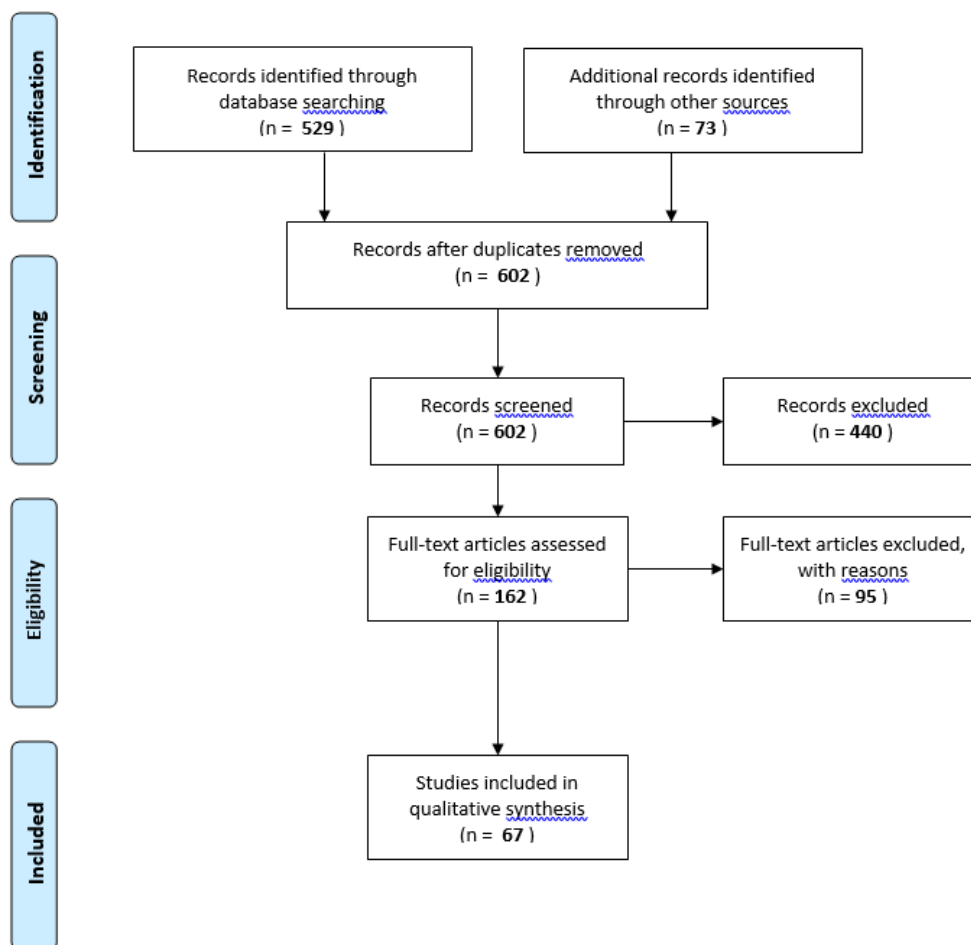


Figure 1: Final PRISMA flow diagram

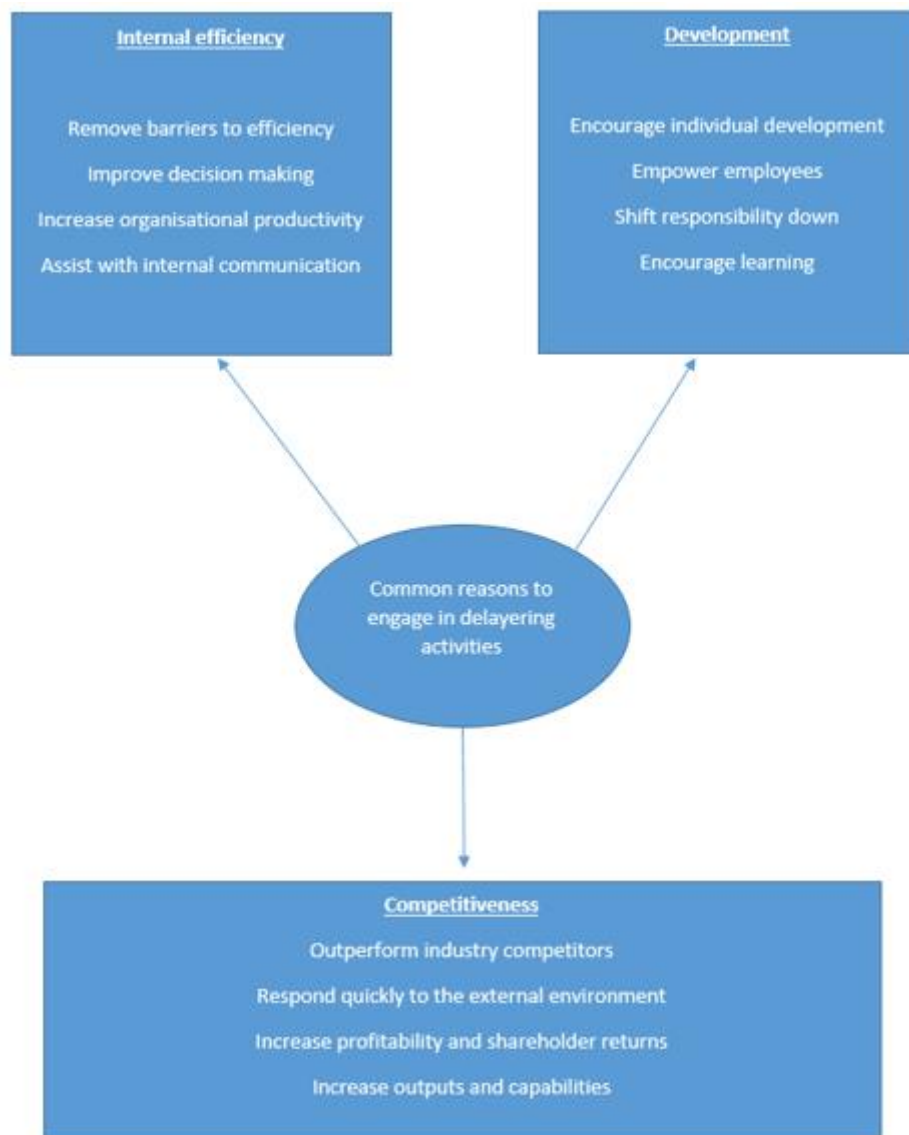


Figure 2: Common reasons for delayering

Method	Frequency
Case study	19
Surveys	17
Interviews	14
Questionnaires	9
Review	6
Third-party report	4
Other (simulation or model development)	6

Table 1: Methods used in eligible papers

Definition	Reference	Key Term/s
<i>“The elimination of layers in a firm’s organisational hierarchy and the broadening of managers’ spans of control”</i>	(Wulf, 2012) <i>The flattened firm: Not as advertised.</i> (p. 5)	Elimination, hierarchy, managers
<i>“The planned vertical compression of managerial levels of hierarchy, involving the wholesale removal of one or more layers of managerial or supervisory staff from the organisation’s payroll”</i>	(Littler, Wiesner & Dunford, 2003) <i>The dynamics of delaying: Changing management structures in three countries.</i> (p. 226)	Compression, removal, hierarchy, managerial
<i>“The removal of hierarchical layers in an organisation”</i>	(Kyper, Hirsekom, Lloyd & Ebrahimpour, 2003) <i>Effects of delaying on supply chains: A pilot study.</i> (p. 2)	Removal, hierarchical, layers
<i>“The process in which a company or organisation reduces the number of its managers”</i>	(Cambridge, 2019a) <i>Delaying.</i>	Reduces, managers
<i>“Removal of some middle layers of management in an organisation so to create a more flexible and responsible hierarchy”</i>	(Kurian, 2013) <i>Delaying.</i>	Removal, layers, flexible
<i>“The process of making the structure of an organisation simpler and therefore more efficient”</i>	(Dictionary of Business, 2006) <i>Delaying.</i>	Structure, simpler, efficient

Table 2: Delaying defined

Definition	Source	Keyword/s
<i>“Any identifiable group or individual who can affect the achievement of an organisation’s objectives or who is affected by the achievement of an organisation’s objectives”</i>	(Freeman & Reed, 1983) <i>Stock and stakeholders.</i> (p. 91)	Individual, affected, objectives
<i>“Any identifiable group or individual on which the organisation is dependent for its continued survival”</i>	(Freeman & Reed, 1983) <i>Stock and stakeholders.</i> (p. 91)	Individual, dependent
<i>“Those who experience or anticipate experiencing potential benefits or dis-benefits as a result of the organisation’s actions”</i>	(Donaldson & Preston, 1995) <i>The stakeholder theory of the corporation.</i> (p. 67)	Benefits, dis-benefits, actions
<i>“Individuals whose interests may be affected as the result of the project execution or project completion”</i>	(Project Management Institute, 2004) <i>A guide to the project management body of knowledge.</i> (p. 16)	Individuals, interests, result
<i>“A person who has or a group of people who have a vested interest in the success of a project and the environment within which the project operates”</i>	(McElroy & Mills, 2007) <i>Managing stakeholders.</i> (p. 7)	Vested interest, person, group
<i>“People who have an interest in a company, or organisation’s affairs”</i>	(Collins, 2019a) <i>Stakeholder</i>	Interest, company, organisation

Table 3: Stakeholder defined

Experiences and reactions of internal stakeholders	Lower-level employees	Middle managers	Top-level managers
Confusion regarding reporting lines, relationships and influence			
Career development opportunities decrease			
Resentment and negative feelings towards organisation			
Conflict between individual and organisational goals			
Less role clarity			
Less job security			
Increase in workload			
Increase in span of control			
Decrease in organisational loyalty			
Increase in work-related stress			
Decrease in morale and motivation			
Feelings of isolation			
Differences between planned actions and outcomes			
Presenteeism			
Focus on taking individual responsibility for career development			
Communication lines open and develop			

Table 4: Internal stakeholder experiences and reactions